

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017

Will This Be On the Test?

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

The question is familiar to both students and teachers:

A hand goes up in the back of the room.

The student asks, "Will this be on the test?"

In other words,

Do I really have to keep listening and absorbing
whatever it is you are going on about?

The teacher — at least, if the teacher is a good one — loves the subject matter
and wants the students to love it to,
and wants them to want to learn just for the joy of learning.

The student may, in fact, care about the subject and find satisfaction in learning,
but the student is keenly aware of one unavoidable fact — **there will be a test.**

There will be a reckoning

when the student will be required to show what he has learned,
to demonstrate that she has mastered the material.

The joy of learning aside,

students learn a very real life lesson when they know there will be a test.

**Life is a series of tests — some bigger than others,
but tests, nonetheless.**

Some will pass and others will fail.

So it's not a bad question to ask: Will this be on the test?

Our scripture readings for this first Sunday of Lent

are about the testing of humanity —

the testing of men and women by which faith in God is proved,
or lack of faith in God is exposed.

The foundational story of the testing of humanity is found, of course,
in early chapters of Genesis,

when the woman and the man are tested by the serpent in the garden.

They know the material, the woman is able to recite the words of God to the serpent,
not quite verbatim, but close enough to get the point.

They know the material but at the end of the day they do not trust what they have learned.

They try to turn the classroom around and put God to the test.

Is God's word really true?

Or is the word of the Tempter more true?

The problem is that the alternative reality that the Tempter offers
is oh, so very alluring, so very attractive, so very enticing.
The man and the woman knew what was on the test,
but they do not pass it.

[By the way, brief commercial: If you show up this Wednesday night,
we will explore this question of Original Sin a little further.]

And so, in this story, the predicament of humanity is set —
the predicament that has been called a dreadful curse —
that God shows us the truth, shows us what is good,
but falsehood and distortion of the good is always close at hand,
and even peddled in a very hard sell by the Tempter.

Now who is this Tempter?

In the Old Testament, he is known as *Hasatan*, or the Satan,
and he is a member of the heavenly council,
that is, a created being, created by God, with access to the heavenly throne.
And his role on the heavenly council is that of prosecuting attorney.
He is the Adversary of humanity.
But his role goes beyond that of simple prosecutor.
He is given permission by God, as he famously does in the story of Job,
to bring trials and tribulations upon humanity
in order to prove human faithfulness, human loyalty, to God.
And *Hasatan* seems to relish his role of *disproving* human faithfulness.

By the time of Jesus in the New Testament,
belief in the role of demonic forces of evil has become popular,
and Jewish belief in the Satan has evolved
so that this Accuser, this Adversary, who once served on the heavenly council
has taken on a demonic quality.
He now commands the deathly spirits of the demonic world.

But whether a member of the heavenly council or the chief demon of the underworld
the Adversary, the Tempter, engages humanity doing everything he can
to lure us away from the good purposes of our Creator and Lord.

And so the contest is set:

The Spirit of God —
the fresh wind that swept over the waters of creation in the beginning,
and the breath of life that was breathed into the first humans —
this Holy Spirit empowers men and women to stay true to God.

And the Satan
seeks to allure men and women away from God's perfect path of life.

The Holy Spirit, also called the Comforter, and the Advocate in the New Testament,
Versus the Deathly Spirit, also called the Adversary, the Tempter.

In the fourth chapter of Matthew,
Jesus leads the charge for humanity into the heat of this life and death battle.

Or rather, Matthew says that Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.
I just learned for the first time this week
that the Greek word for "led up"
can sometimes mean "to set sail" or to "navigate."
So in a bit of a mixed metaphor,
with the winds of the Spirit filling his sails,
Jesus sets out to navigate the most challenging voyage he has yet faced.
Jesus is being led by the Spirit into the great test of human life,
to either trust God, or to depart from God's way.

The wilderness testing follows immediately upon Jesus' baptism,
when the Spirit descends like a dove to rest upon Jesus,
and the voice from heaven proclaims him to be the Beloved Son.

Any Jewish listener would have caught the importance of this progression,
that Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism
and is led into the wilderness.

It was the Spirit of God, the wind of God,
that parted the waters of the Sea
and led the people of Israel through the waters out of bondage
and toward the freedom of the Promised Land.
But first the Spirit led them into the wilderness,
into 40 years of testing, to see if they would remain faithful to God.
Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights in the desert,
is surely the replication of this story.

And the great suspense of this story is the question:
is Jesus ready for the test? Will Jesus pass the test?
The people of Israel repeatedly failed the test.
Will Jesus pass it?

The temptations that Jesus faces are not unique to him.
The whole point is that they are the great temptations that are common to all humanity.
As the letter to the Hebrews says,
*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are...*

In the first temptation,

the devil tries to foster a sense of entitlement in Jesus.

If — or since — you are the Son of God,

you ought not to be hungry, but deserve to have your hunger satisfied.

The Tempter wants Jesus to act on his own
in resistance to God's will.

When the people of Israel were hungry in the wilderness,
they grumbled and complained against the Lord.

But Jesus does not complain.

Instead, he draws on the **Sword of the Spirit**,
and meets the temptation head-on

*It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

So will *this* be on the test?

Will we be tempted to feel entitled to more than what God has given us?

Will we be tempted to grumble and complain that God is not providing for us
the way we think God ought to be providing for us?

Will we be tempted to set aside God's will for us in order to try and meet our own needs?

Most certainly, this will be on our test.

In the second temptation,

the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple,
the place the Jews considered to be the center of the world,
and the highest point on earth.

Placing Jesus here, at the center of the universe,

the Tempter tries to distort the purpose of religious faith,
turning it from a trusting relationship with a loving God
into a mechanism by which men and women manipulate God
to get what they want and achieve their own goals.

Throw yourself off, and see if God will save you!

To this temptation,

Jesus answers, again quoting scripture, saying

Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

It is not the Lord who needs to be tested, but men and women.

God is at the center of religious faith, not the man or the woman.

So will *this* be on our test?

Will we be tempted to think that religious faith is about manipulating God
into giving us what we want?

Will we be tempted to think that if we or our loved ones face deprivation,
or face injustice, or are not preserved from pain and suffering,
that God is not doing God's job?

Will our faith depend on God's doing things the way we think God ought to do them?

In short, will we be tempted to put ourselves at the center of the universe?

Most certainly this is on our test, nearly every day.

In the third temptation,

Jesus is taken *up to a very high mountain*
(here we are on another high mountain, like last week)
and the devils shows *him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*

Here the Tempter is more blatant:

He doesn't mention Jesus status as the Son of God,
because it doesn't suit his purpose.

He simply hopes the allure of power will be enough to turn Jesus away from God
and to worship the devil instead.

In Matthew, the allure of power is the devil's final trump card,
and he plays it for all he is worth.

Rather than trusting that he is the Son of God,
will Jesus opt instead for worldly power and prestige
and all the luxury that comes along with it?

Again, Jesus turns to the scripture:

*"Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*

Will this be on our test?

We who live in the wealthiest, most powerful nation on earth?
Will we be tempted to trust in our own power, and to protect that power,
rather than to be obedient to God's commands?

What do you think? On the test, perhaps?

Jesus, of course, gets a perfect score on his test.

But his mission is only beginning.

His testing will continue, and it will grow.

And the One who vanquished the Tempter

has become our Teacher, our Rabbi, and — if we will trust him — our Lord.

But are we learning from our Master to be skilled combatants in the deserts of our journey?

Are you ready for the test? Are you studying?

Are you able to draw the **Sword of the Spirit — the Word of God** — from its sheath
and hack the head off the snake, and wield it against the Tempter,
the devil?

Are you skilled in this sort of battle, or will you be easily subdued?

Perhaps this Season of Lent is a time for you to practice,

to learn the art of spiritual swordplay,

to arm yourself against the attacks that are coming your way daily,

to learn to recognize and block the Tempter's subtle moves,
and to deal him a vanquishing blow.

Take up the Sword of the Spirit and learn to use it well.

Read your Bible. Study it. Know it.

Because the answer to the question
...is the one you didn't want to hear.

Yes.

Everything is fair game. It will **all** be on the test.

Are you ready?