


Text: James 1:12-18 (Genesis 22:1-18, Mark 1:9-15)

 Invocavit (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent)

### ***Times of Trial, Testing, and Temptation***

In the name of him who for us overcame the temptations of the evil one, dear friends in Christ: I can't think of many people who actually enjoy taking tests. Over at CLS where I teach the 8<sup>th</sup> grade religion class, the surest way to elicit a collective groan of despair from my students is to announce "Tomorrow there will be a test on this material". If I really want to get them stirred up I'll add, "And there will be several essay questions". They hate that because it means they're going to have to actually think about their responses. Or, as they say it, "It makes the test so hard!"

I can relate (even if I don't sympathize). I still have recurring nightmares about taking tests in a series of physics courses I had in college. The tests were always the same: ten problems, three hours to work them out. The professor would say, "Look through all the problems and do the ones that are easiest for you first. Then go back and do the more difficult ones." So, in the dream, I look over the first one, maybe write down an equation or two; realize that I haven't the foggiest notion of how to work it out, so I'll go to the next one. In what seems like only a few minutes, I've done the same thing with all the problems. I'm beginning to get a bit worried. But then I look up at the clock and discover to my horror that there's only five minutes left. Panic ensues. I wake up in a cold sweat, and it usually takes several moments before I figure out, no, that was a long time ago. I'm not going to fail physics. Funny thing of it is, I passed those classes with fairly good grades. What I see in the dream never really happened; but it's pretty clear that the fear of it happening was impressed deeply on my psyche and still haunts me today.

Of course, there are other kinds of tests besides the academic ones people take in school. There are tests of strength, tests of skill, tests of endurance, tests of courage ... and as difficult or unpleasant as any of them may be, even harder and more painful are the tests of faith that we are sometimes called to undergo as believers in Jesus Christ. This is the common thread of today's readings from Holy Scripture. In the Old Testament, we heard how the Lord tested the faith of Abraham by commanding him to do something that any loving parent would find impossible: to sacrifice his own son and give him up as a burnt offering to atone for his sins. In the Gospel, we heard how the Lord Jesus, after his Baptism in the Jordan, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness; there to undergo forty days of fasting and temptation by Satan – a test of his trust in his heavenly Father, who, not coincidentally, was in the process of preparing his Son to be the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world.

And in today's Epistle, St. James gives us insight into God's purpose in subjecting his children to tests of faith from time to time. It's quite a bit different than other kinds of testing. With an academic test, or a test of strength, say, the testing reveals what has already been achieved: what you know or how strong you are. After the test, the person administering it knows what level of accomplishment you've reached. But when the Lord puts your faith to the test, he does it for other reasons. Obviously he already knows how well you're going to do. It goes with being omniscient. You're not going to surprise him when you succeed or fail. But you may surprise yourself. And that's one reason the Lord tests our faith: to show us how faithful or not we are. I mean, it's one thing to imagine that I have a tremendous amount of faith; but it's only when that faith is placed under stress that I can see how firm or fragile it really is.

And that leads to the other reason the Lord tests our faith: it's the best way to stimulate us to make grow. Take Abraham for example. The Lord tells him to sacrifice his son. Well, why would the Lord ask such a thing? The answer is that Abraham has a long track record of *not* trusting the Lord. God promised to make of Abraham a great nation and to give him descendants as countless as the stars. What we find is that Abraham doesn't really trust the Lord to do this. He keeps thinking that he has to take matters into his own hands in order to make the promises of God come true. So he fails again and again to simply trust the Lord to do what he's promised. It's only when all of Abraham's schemes to do it himself have failed, and when he and his wife, Sarah, are far too old to have children, that the Lord comes to him and says, "Now I'm going to give you the son I promised – and through him, I will give you all the descendants I told you I would." At this Abraham falls down laughing. "You can't be serious, Lord. I'm a hundred years old and my wife is ninety. It's not possible. There's got to be another way." *That's* what Abraham believed. That's what his reason and senses told him must be true. But despite Abraham's lack of faith, the Lord kept his word. And within a year, Sarah had given birth to their son Isaac, just as the Lord had promised.

So, now place yourself in Abraham's sandals. He's been told to sacrifice his now teenaged son – a boy more dear to him than his own life. For three days he's left to struggle with it. "The Lord has told me to do this awful thing. I can't understand why. It doesn't make any sense, and it's horrible to contemplate. And yet the Lord has promised me that through this my son I will have innumerable descendants. He's always kept his Word in the past – even when I couldn't see or understand how it could be so." The inspired writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham came to the conclusion that if indeed he sacrificed Isaac, the Lord would raise him from the dead. That's how confident Abraham was in the Lord. "If Isaac dies, God will have to raise him to fulfill his Word. And God can do that." The point is that the test of Abraham's faith forced him to go back to the Words and Promises of God – which had always proven faithful in the past. And it was by focusing his full attention on God's Promises that caused his faith to stand up under the trial.

We see something similar happening in today's Gospel. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert east of the Jordan – into the same wilderness that Israel once wandered for forty years. Like Israel, he goes out there without any food. He has to trust his heavenly Father to take care of him. We know that with the Israelites, as soon as their bellies started to grumble a bit from hunger, they accused the Lord of leading them into the desert to kill them by starvation. They failed the test of faith. The Lord responded by feeding his people with bread from heaven. He proved himself faithful to his Word and to his people even when they did not trust him. Now Jesus undergoes the pains of hunger. His faith is put to the test for forty long days during which time he eats nothing. He trusts that if this is where my Father has called me to be, then he must have a plan to take care of me. His Promises cannot fail. Unlike he did for Israel, the Father does not give Jesus anything to eat during this entire period; but we're told instead that "angels ministered to him". What did they do? Well, they didn't give Jesus a cheeseburger and fries. No, they spoke God's Word and Promises to Jesus. That's what sustained him. That's what strengthened his faith to endure the trial. For as Jesus himself said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

And the same is true of us when we undergo trials of various kinds by which the Lord test our faith. It's when we are sick or injured – or when we're dealing with a loved one who is – and when the storms of life damage or destroy our homes and livelihoods, and when the unexpected bills pile up and there's no money in the account to pay for them ... it's in such times of trial that the Lord puts our faith to the test. And to strengthen our faith so that it can hold up, he directs us to his Word and Promises. He sends his pastors and other people to

speak these Words to us. And he causes us to reflect on how none of his Promises has ever failed in the past – how he always comes through. And it is through the hearing of the Word and our meditation upon it that the Lord gives the very faith that's required to endure the test.

It needs to be said, however, that there are other voices that come to us in times of testing; voices that we're better off not listening to. When the Lord gives us a test to strengthen and prove our faith, you can be sure that Satan or some other fallen angel is right there too. Their goal is to use the occasion to undermine our faith. We know that when Jesus was tempted, Satan suggested that he take matters into his own hands: "Command these stones to become bread. And here, take the shortcut. God's ways are hard. He demands way too much. Tell you what: I'll make it easy for you. I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth if you simply fall down and worship me."

And we can well imagine what he said to Abraham over the three days it took him to travel to Moriah. "What are you doing? You're not really going to sacrifice your son, are you? What kind of God would ask such a thing? Are you sure you heard him right? Did he really say ...? And killing, that's a sin, you know. God wouldn't want you to do it. I don't think you should trust the Lord this time. He's playing you for a fool. You can't trust him. Don't do it. Tell him to forget it." Think about having to endure that for three days, and all the while your sinful, doubting self wanting to give into it. That's the other voice we have to put up with: the unfaithful traitor within; the one who tells us, "It's too hard. I can't do it. The Lord is unfair to me – he's asking too much. He wouldn't mind if I gave up or took matters into my own hands. He wouldn't mind if I disobeyed him."

That's where we really have to be careful. St. James is emphatic about it: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'." As a pastor, I've heard this many times. "God wouldn't have put this temptation in front of me if he didn't want me to fall for it" or "God wouldn't have given me these desires, if he didn't expect me to act on them." It's a twisted bit of logic, but it works for the sinful mind seeking to justify itself. And it concludes with either: "Yes, I'm sinning; but it's God's fault so he can't blame me" or "Well, since God makes me do it, it must not be sin."

Sorry, says St. James, you can't blame God for your sin. The Lord tests us to increase our faith. Satan and our own sinful natures tempt us to undermine and destroy faith. God tests our faith so that it endures and takes hold of life eternal. It's the devil and our sinful natures that encourage us to turn from the Lord and doubt his Promises – and the result of that is eternal death in hell.

Therefore, James tells us, we should not allow ourselves to be deceived. What God does for us is always good. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is not variation or shadow due to change." In the context, he's talking about all those hard and painful trials the Lord subjects us to. Those are the good and perfect gifts: the tests of faith we hate so much having to endure. They are good because by them the Lord works in us the genuine tried and true faith that takes hold of life. If he didn't subject us to such tests, we might never develop the genuine faith needed to win the crown of life. Faith, like a muscle, must be exercised to be strong. And the Lord knows for each one of us exactly how to provide the training we need.

And if we have any doubts about it, we have only to look to the cross of Jesus, for there we see the full extent of the Father's love for us. There we see how he subjected his own Son to the ultimate test of faith in order to prove his faithfulness to us. And there too we see him

keeping his promise to Abraham – to make him the father of descendants as numerous as the stars. How? By actually following through with what he stopped Abraham from doing: giving his Son as the atoning sacrifice for sin, and then raising him up to become the One through whom by faith we are made the children of Abraham and the heirs of God in Christ.

This is the Lord's unchanging and single-minded plan and purpose for us. This is the reason he subjects us to tests of faith. Therefore let us be confident of his love in times of trial; and confessing our sins and resisting the voices that would lead us astray, let us hold fast to his unfailing truth, that we too may receive the crown of life in Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***