

Date: February 13, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Lent 1

**SERMON: Passing the Test**

Text(s): Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

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Taking tests is an experience with which all of us are intimately familiar. We've been taking tests of one kind or another most of our lives. Being married to a teacher, I have occasionally heard the opinion expressed that most of what a teacher does these days is not teach, but simply administer state or federally-mandated tests.

A lot of us have framed pieces of paper on the walls of our office or stuck away in a closet somewhere that certify that we have passed enough tests to have been granted a particular academic degree or certified to extract teeth from people's mouths or repair broken plumbing, whether it be a blocked kitchen drain or a broken heart.

One of the pieces of paper that I'm proudest of is this pink one. It says that I managed, by the grace of God and about \$1100 to pass the test to be able to drive on the roads of France and the rest of the European Union. Believe me, this is no small feat, even when one has been a driver for more than thirty years as I had been when I took this test. And it's good for life; isn't that great!

Tests come in a variety of formats and contexts, however, and many of the most important tests we take have nothing to do with academic achievement or proficiency in professional development. Some of the most important tests are those that life springs on us when we're least expecting it, and often we don't even know we're being tested, or even if we do feel we're being tested, we don't know whether we're passing or failing. We get a call from the school principal or guidance counselor telling us that a son or daughter has been discovered using drugs, and suddenly all our parenting skills are up for review. Or our company is bought out in a

corporate acquisition and we discover that under the terms of the agreement, we're one of the cost-reducing measures and almost without warning, we're unemployed, and we're facing a test that it's very difficult to prepare for. Or our boss instructs us to do something that we regard as clearly in conflict with our sense of ethics or legality, and at once our priorities and values are under examination. Or we make it to retirement and think that the next stretch of our lives is going to be fun, and then discover that without the sense of purpose that our jobs gave us, we hadn't developed a sense of who we were apart from our jobs, and we have to discover who we are all over again, and that's a tough test.

In both of our lessons this morning, we encounter people facing an important test. Both are familiar stories to people who read their Bibles, and both stories have inspired countless painters and poets and musicians and preachers down through the centuries. In our Old Testament lesson, we heard the familiar tale of the first man and first woman, in the innocence of the newly created world. The drama in which Adam and Eve are involved is the human drama. The test they face is the test that Jesus faced which we heard in our Gospel lesson, and it's the test all of us face as well. The test is this: on whom or what do we ultimately depend to give our lives meaning and purpose? In whom or what do we ultimately put our trust? Will we be content to be creatures who derive the meaning of our lives from our relationship to our creator, or will we reject creatureliness and demand to be our own masters?

Unlike the French driving test, this test is not a test that we just pass once and then are done with it for the rest of our lives. It's more like the test every husband faces when his wife says, "Honey, do you think this new dress makes me look fat?" Doesn't matter how many times you pass that test, you're going to face it again, and you know you'd better be ready, because there's only one right answer, and you're dead if you don't get it. So with the question about whom or what we're depending upon for ultimate meaning

in our lives. That's a question that we must answer in each new situation we face. And the test comes in many different forms, and almost always like a pop quiz in calculus, it is sprung upon us unexpectedly, and without time for last-minute cramming. Only long years of patiently doing our homework every day will prepare us to face these sorts of tests.

In our Old Testament lesson, the serpent poses the test question to Adam and Eve in a very subtle manner. He plays the part of the sympathetic listener who plants an almost subliminal notion that God really doesn't have Adam and Eve's best interests at heart. "*Did God say that you cannot eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden?*" he asks slyly. Of course that's not what God said, and he knows it. God only forbade the eating of the fruit of one particular tree—the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Why that tree? Because the kind of knowledge of good and evil that God doesn't want for his human creatures is the destructive kind that is gained by actual participation in evil. Obeying God's command leads to one kind of knowledge of evil; disobeying it leads to another kind. Freedom to choose is present in both cases; the consequences of the way in which that freedom is exercised are radically different.

The difference between a saint and a sinner is not that saints know nothing of evil, but that they are people who have chosen the good, have chosen God's will over their own. As a result, the knowledge of evil that the saint has, is always more profound than the knowledge of evil a sinner has. The saints' knowledge of evil is a knowledge rooted in their positive experience of the good. This is a truth that St. Augustine pondered and his reflections have hardly ever been surpassed. "Evil has no positive nature;" he wrote, "but the loss of good has received the name 'evil.' All which is corrupted is deprived of good." Evil, then, to the saint is understood as the absence of that positive experience of good. That kind of knowledge of evil keeps it from getting

into them and dragging them down. Sinners, on the other hand, never know what they're missing. The knowledge of the good is hidden from them, because they are caught up in evil. Under the guise of being their own master and doing what they want, they become slaves to their desires without realizing it. As one of my seminary professors put it in unforgettable fashion, "There are more productive ways to learn about farming than being dragged through the barnyard face down."

Though I don't generally look to Hollywood for great theological insights, in the "Star Wars" movies, there is one point they got exactly right. Darth Vader, the villain, is a Jedi knight who chose to experience the "Dark Side" of the "Force." And he is bent on drawing his son Luke Skywalker into that experience. Remember that great scene when he and Luke are dueling with one another? He tells Luke, "Let your hate flow. Feel the hate. Feel the power of the Dark Side." Luke is tempted. He wants to let that anger and hatred take control. He's in the fight of his life, after all. He can sense the power that it will bring him if he wins. But within him, he hears the voice of his teachers, Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobe, warning him of the consequences of yielding to the dark side. Yes, it promises a dimension of knowledge and experience which he does not have. It offers a power to control events and other people which is alluring. But Luke resists the temptation, and in the end, we all understand that his knowledge of evil is much more profound than his father's. By yielding to the power of the Dark Side, Darth Vader has actually become less than a man. His kind of knowledge has diminished his humanity, while Luke Skywalker's, which is the knowledge of evil gained by choosing the good, enriches his humanity.

Believing the serpent's lie, that our desires for godlike knowledge, that our own ego-driven program for our lives is more trustworthy than God's is the first step toward the edge of the

cliff. The second step, the one which takes us over the edge of the cliff and into the abyss itself, is when we act on that fundamental distrust of God's will and give preference to our own desire. *"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one as wise as God, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate."* Adam and Eve are set up to take a Fall, a Fall whose reverberations have echoed down the long history of the human race ever since.

If the story of Adam and Eve shows us the pattern which this fundamental human test takes, the story of the testing that Jesus faced during his forty days in the wilderness following his baptism gives us a concrete example of how to pass that test. Matthew has linked Jesus' baptism with this testing time in the wilderness. For it was at his baptism that Jesus became aware of his vocation as God's Son, the Messiah. It was there that he became aware of God's goal for his life. Then he, too, like some new Adam, faced the test of whether he would accept that identity and vocation.

Jesus faced three temptations—the temptation to base his identity as God's chosen Messiah on crowd-pleasing miracles such as turning stones into bread, or on spectacular and compelling manifestations of divine power like throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple while calling on angels to lower him gently to the ground, or taking the option of selling out to earthly political methods to achieve sovereignty, which in Jesus' day as in ours, was the usual unholy trinity of money, violence, and political expediency. All these are just different forms of the same age-old human test from Adam and Eve to the present day: whose will grounds our lives and governs our actions?

Jesus passed the test because he was prepared for it. He had thoroughly done his homework. We see that preparation evident in

his answers to the Tempter. In each case, his answer is not, "I want or I think or I believe or I demand." In today's jargon, it wasn't all about him. Rather, in each case, his answer was *"It is written. . ."* His mind and heart were filled, not with ambitions derived from his own desires for autonomy or power or wealth, nor from the messages sent to him by his empty stomach but with the stories of men and women of the past and how God had worked through their lives. The stories of Adam and Eve, the stories of Moses and Elijah, the stories of Abraham and Sarah, written down in the scriptures, with all that the insights and questions about the will and working of God they provoke, were the resources on which Jesus drew to find the answers to the test.

I suggest to you that Jesus' facing of the test is not substantially different from ours. How he faced the test and passed it offers us the clues we need to face and pass the test as well. The test is the same test: it's the test of our grasp of what it means to live a truly human life. Is a truly human life one in which we live according to God's will or one in which we assert our own will? Will we realize the power of our own humanity by choosing to do God's will, or will we insist on "becoming like God, knowing good and evil," as Adam and Eve did and set ourselves up for a fall?

Lent is a particularly appropriate time for us to consider our own preparations for passing that test. This space which the church has carved out of time—this forty-day chunk of space—is a gift to us to allow us to reflect on the state of our own preparation for the test. Where are we looking for answers to the questions which that test will bring us? What stories are the stories which provide us with the mirror in which to look and see ourselves and understand who we really are? The stories told by Wall Street or the stories told by the advertising industry or the stories told us by politicians and worldly power brokers? Those stories are bankrupt. They don't

lead to happy endings. Never have, up till now, and I doubt they ever will. Or are we listening to the stories told by people of faith down through the centuries, especially the stories written down in these writings that the Church has called the Holy Scriptures? If these stories, the stories of faith, the stories of God's involvement with us, are going to be the controlling stories, the moral and spiritual compasses by which we find direction, then we have to spend some time living with and in those stories. That is why we need to be reading and studying and meditating on and praying the scriptures—not just to gain head knowledge of our faith tradition, not to find answers to every question our curiosity may dredge up, but to allow those stories to get into us and form us and shape us so that our daily choices and decisions can arise out of our identity as sons and daughters of God, just as Jesus' answers to the Tempter arose out of his identity as God's Beloved Son.

We, too, learn to know God by rooting our identity in a community of people who know God and are learning to trust God. When we gather together to worship, to pray, to listen, we take our cues from those stories that have been the roadmap for people of faith down through the centuries. By being together, by sharing our struggles with one another, by telling our stories and the biblical stories to one another, by praying for one another, by encouraging one another—that's how we prepare for the test. And as we share in that sacred story-telling, we discover our own identity as surely as Jesus discovered his. And we gain the courage to freely choose God's will over our own will just as Jesus did, and to find in that choice, the true meaning and purpose for our lives.