

There will be a test. Just so you know, there's going to be a test.

We'll receive everything we need to be prepared for the test.

But, heads up. There will be a test.

This morning, we just heard the Gospel lesson that is often referred to as "The Three Temptations of Christ." The same story appears in all 3 of the synoptic Gospels in the Bible – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And we always hear this same story on the first Sunday of Lent.

Lent is this purple season during the church year – the 40 days (minus Sundays) before Easter. It's the season where we, as Christians, attempt to slow down and spend time thinking about the sacrifice Jesus is preparing to make for us.

So, we hear the story of "The Three Temptations of Christ" this Sunday each year to remind of our desire during Lent to concentrate on prayer, fasting, and spiritual discipline as patterned by Jesus. The story reminds us to resist temptation and evil and to rely on God for what we need.

AND The amount of time Jesus spent in the wilderness – 40 days – is how long Lent lasts. It's all tied together.

Our Gospel began with Jesus being led into the wilderness and "tempted" by the devil. And just a couple of sentences later, that devil is referred to as "the tempter."

Now here's an interesting fact I learned while studying this passage. The original Greek word (pie-RAD-zo) that has been translated into English as "tempt" is actually much more nuanced.

In English, "to tempt" has a bad connotation. It always means to entice us to do something wrong – to seduce us into sin – to persuade us to go the wrong way. But (pie-RAD-zo) actually means something closer to the English "to test."

If we are "tested", there is no implication that that the "tester" is out to trip us up or get us to do something wrong. A test is neutral. Here is the situation – the question. We choose how to respond.

See. I told you there would be a test.

Let's look at this Gospel Lesson as if Jesus is being TESTED instead of TEMPTED. Why? You might ask. When it comes down to it, what's the difference?

2 reasons. The original word used was closer to test than to tempt...so that gives us a different perspective.

And because I think in our lives, we are more often tested than tempted. I suspect that most of us are not "tempted" to do the wrong thing by someone offering us something amazing. No, I think in our daily lives we are given options – tests – and we must choose what we're going to do.

After his time in the wilderness Jesus is tired and hungry and is given the opportunity to turn stones into bread. The test – which is more important? Your own physical comfort and well-being or trusting in God's provision. Jesus answers. I'll trust God.

A second test suggests that Jesus should throw himself from the top of the temple because God will save him....and everyone on the ground will witness this spectacle. The test – how far will you go to be admired? Jesus answers. I am not going to test God in order to feed my ego and impress others.

A third test offers Jesus all the power in the world if he turns his back on God and worships Satan. The test – what will you do to feed your desire for power? Jesus declines. The love of God is more important than power and prestige.

So...yeah....there's going to be a test. Everyday, there will be a test...probably more than one.

You see someone on a street corner asking for money. What do you do? This is the kind of test I'm talking about. That person is not tempting you to do something wrong. They are there asking for money. It could be multiple choice test. Do I ignore them? Do I look at them, acknowledge them with a smile? Do I speak to them but not give them any money? Do I give them money? Do I buy food for them?

And now we reach the difficult part of this sermon - because a test is actually much more difficult than a temptation. When tempted to do something we know is wrong, there is a “right” response. No. No. A thousand times, no.

But this test I’ve just proposed is tricky. I think we can agree that ignoring the person asking for money is not the best response. But depending on many different factors, any of the other choices might be the right one for you in that situation.

As Christians, most everything we do is a test. At a social gathering, do we spend our time catching up with friends we’ve known for years...or reach out to the person sitting alone in the corner? Or something in between?

Do we spend our time going out to fancy lunches or work in a food pantry to help those who don’t have enough to eat? Or both?

Do we keep stuffing our closets with clothes we seldom wear, or do we buy those new clothes and donate them to people who don’t have the means to do so?

When we vote, do we side with someone who will make our lives as comfortable and profitable as possible...or do we vote for someone who has ideas to help those less fortunate than us? Or a combination?

Do we support people who are attempting to make a better life for themselves and their families – escaping danger and oppression – and coming to our country? Or do we villainize them, put them in prisons with no representation, and ship them back to what they are trying to escape...or do we work on our country’s immigration system?

As you see, these tests are essays, not simple true or false questions. The tests we face as Christians do not always have cut and dried answers. We know how we SHOULD respond, but those responses take time and a lot of thought, energy and action...and prayer.

Jesus tells us to not give up. Don’t walk out of the test. Keep chipping away until...well, I’d like to say, until the test is complete. We may not complete each test we are given. But we can help those after us get a head start.

And the wonderful part is that we don't have to get an A on the tests! We really don't even have to pass. We just have to show and be present for them. Don't skip class.

I'll wrap this up with a thought from retired Episcopal priest, Michael March. On his website "Interrupting the Silence", he suggests that there are actually FOUR Temptations...four tests...in the Gospel lesson today. It comes before the three which are clearly stated. And we miss it because we start this Gospel lesson at the first verse of the fourth chapter of Matthew.

If we back up a few verses – into the third chapter of Matthew, we hear the story of the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. The two verses that precede today's Gospel are these. Matthew 3:16 and 17.

"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

We then jump into the story of Jesus in the wilderness. And just TWO VERSE LATER, the tester says to Jesus, "If you are the Child of God....."

IF? IF? Of course Jesus is the child of God. A voice from heaven just said so. Why is the tester putting doubt into Jesus' head?

Likewise, why do we ever doubt that we are beloved children of God? We do, though don't we? We think we're not good enough. We think we are not special enough. We're not smart enough to take the tests. We've failed too many tests. We allow that testing voice to say, "IF you are a beloved child of God....."

This week I joined our Campus Ministry partner – Open Table/Luther house – on Thursday evening. Our discussion turned to Lent and what we might give up or take on for the season. Pastor Rhonda, the leader of the ministry, said that she was going to give up negative thoughts about herself. She was going to stop doubting her abilities and questioning her decisions. She was going to courageously act like the beloved child of God she knows in her heart she truly is. She will strive to be the Christian we are all called to be.

My friends. Every day is a test. Every personal encounter is a test. Every news story is a test. Every drive on the interstate is a test. Every prayer is a test.

We are all beloved children of God. There is no reason to doubt that we can take each test and do our best to get it right. Let's join Pastor Rhonda and courageously move out into the world knowing we have everything we need take these tests.

Let's sharpen our pencils.