

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Is your faith being tested?

We can keep faith in the wilderness when we hold on to God's promises.

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-17

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Opening Hymn: Be still my soul [749]

Choruses: You are my all in all, I need thee every hour

Closing Hymn: Take time to be holy [638]

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We've all taken tests.

Tests for mathematics and tests for spelling,
Tests for comprehension and tests for memory.

Some of us have taken tests for driving.

Some of us have taken tests for citizenship.

We tend to primarily think of tests as being evaluative,

That is, a way to judge whether we meet the standard.

But tests are also formative.

In the pressure cooker of doubt and fear
and preparation and performance
tests teach us about others and ourselves.

Every year I get to watch new infantry soldiers

working through their basic military training.

This training is meant to ensure that

They can competently use their weapons,

That they can make their way around a map,

That they can survive austere environments.

There are tests that run throughout their program,

That continually assess whether they meet the standard.

But more than just ensuring they meet the standard

This testing provokes in them a desire to perform well.

It often pushes them beyond

what they had previously thought possible.

Those who are successful in this basic training

Have done more than check off all the boxes.

They have grown mentally/spiritually/emotionally stronger.

They are more effective and resilient.

PAUSE

Today we are continuing our journey through the Gospel of Matthew.

Last week we heard about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.

Today we have heard about Jesus' testing in the wilderness.

Today's passage ends with the first major transition in Matthew's Gospel.
 Highlighted by the phrase "from that time on" this transition
 marks the shift in Matthew's Gospel
 from all the preliminary materials
 to Jesus' public ministry.

But this is getting ahead of ourselves.
 Today we hear how Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness
 To be tempted by the Devil.

Now that's an interesting statement.
 Are the Spirit and Satan collaborating?

A better way of understanding this verse is that
 "God, through the Spirit,
 intends to test Jesus;
 Satan, God's indirect agent,
 seeks to tempt the Messiah..."ⁱ

Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

Jesus has left civilisation for the outback,
 Without packing extra provisions.
 He has intentionally left all the world's distractions
 Including food,
 so he can cultivate his relationship with his Father.

After fasting forty days and forty nights,
 Jesus is hungry.

And it is in this weakened physical state,
 Satan makes an appearance.
 Satan has come to "draw Jesus away
 from [this] holy reliance upon the Father
 to an unholy independence."ⁱⁱ

What is Satan's strategy?
 He knows all our pressure points...

Satan's first attempt is to focus on Jesus' basic needs.
 He knows that Jesus is hungry,
 So he challenges Jesus to turn some stones into bread.

Now there is nothing wrong with fulfilling
 Our need for food.
 But Jesus is intentionally denying himself this privilege
 So he can foster his connection with the Father.

Will the Devil convince Jesus
 That this basic need is more important
 Than his connection with God?

No.

Quoting from Scripture (from Deuteronomy) Jesus tells the Devil
 [and reminds himself]:
 “It takes more than bread to stay alive.
 It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus will trust God to take care of his physical needs.
 Round one.

But the Devil is not so easily defeated.
 This time he showcases his own knowledge of Scripture,
 to prod Jesus into showcasing
 God’s care for his own safety and security.

The Devil goads Jesus to jump off the roof of the Jerusalem Temple.
 He quotes from Psalm 91:
 “He has placed you in the care of angels.
 They will catch you
 so that you won’t so much as stub your toe
 on a stone.”^{iv}

Now clearly the Psalmist isn’t asserting that God’s promises
 are invitations to take unnecessary risks.
 All the same, Jesus argue with the Devil
 Over his interpretation of Scripture.

Jesus simply responds with yet another quotation from Deuteronomy:
 “It is also written:
 ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’

Jesus will trust God to take care of his physical needs.
 And Jesus will trust God to provide for his protection.
 Round two.

But the Devil remains undeterred.
 This time he pulls out all the stops.
 He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world

And then he says to Jesus:
 “They’re yours—lock, stock, and barrel.
 Just go down on your knees
 and worship me, and they’re yours.”^v

Again, Jesus doesn't get into an argument
 With the truth, the veracity of Jesus' proposal.
 The Devil it seems, is like those scammers in Toronto
 Trying to sell houses that aren't their own.

But aside from this question about the Devil's authority,
 Jesus has prioritised God's purposes.
 Jesus will follow God's way
 even if it's the hard and lonely way.
 Jesus won't take any easy shortcut.
 Jesus' rejection this time is less polite, more forceful.
 "Beat it, Satan!"
 [and then yet another quotation from Deuteronomy:]

"Worship the Lord your God, and only him.
 Serve him with absolute singleheartedness."^{vi}

Jesus will trust God to take care of his physical needs.
 Jesus will trust God to provide for his protection.
 Jesus will put God's purposes first
 and trust that God will care for his ego needs.

Round three.
 It is a knock-out with Jesus as winner: Christus Victor.
 And the Devil being carried out the back door.

But as interesting as this story of Jesus defeat of the Devil
 Is the method he uses to beat him.
 Jesus quotes Scripture to the Devil.
 And Jesus reminds himself of God's direction
 and God's promises.

PAUSE

Not many of us will wander into the outback
 To engage in 40 days of fasting
 But we all end up spending time in the wilderness.

We all end up in places where resources are scarce,
 where our energy is depleted,
 and we are searching for God.

Maybe it's difficult health challenge.
 Maybe it's a big decision with few up-sides.
 Maybe it's a conflicted relationship.

The pressure points in life
 Often draw us to seek God's will and provision.
 But sometimes the direction seems absent
 And sometimes we are left famished and weak.

We may know in our heart of hearts that God is good,
 That God keeps God's promises,
 But as time wears on, our faith stretches thin.

So how can we continue to trust in God's provision, God's protection,
 God's care for our ego needs,
 When our faith is wearing thin?

We might just follow the example of Jesus.

You may not be a chapter and verse sort of Christian,
 But you might consider learning some key bible verses
 that speak to your situation.

You might consider singing choruses and hymns,
 [outside of a worship service]
 that remind you of God's care,

You might engage in an intentional study of Scripture,
 Where you learn how to sift between truth and error.

Keeping faith in times of difficulty
 also requires input from the broader church community.

Others can speak into our lives
 with their wisdom and experience,
 Support us with prayer and encouragement
 So we can keep faith for another day.

Jesus might go it alone,
 But we aren't Jesus,
 we need each other.

In the end, as we are upheld by those reminders
 of God's direction and provision in Scripture.
 As we are encouraged by the support of God's people,
 We are given strength for times of testing.

And when the time of testing is over,
 we emerge transformed,
 like beautiful butterflies from a chrysalis.

PAUSE

Are you in the wilderness?
 Are you undergoing a difficult time of testing?
 Don't despair. God hasn't given up on you.
 Rather God is undertaking a new work of transformation.

God is determined to deepen your faith, strengthen your spirituality.
To shape and equip you to serve God more faithfully,
And encourage those just starting a time of test of their own.

ⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare *Matthew* 23

ⁱⁱ F. Dean Lueking "Matthew 4:1-11" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 20,21

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 4:4 MSG

^{iv} Matthew 4:6 MSG

^v Matthew 4:9 MSG

^{vi} Matthew 4:10 MSG