

**THE REAL TEST**  
**February 25, 2007**  
**Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr**

Like all the other major seasons in the Christian year, Lent has a story, which is so intimately connected with it that we cannot think of the one without the other. Just as we cannot celebrate Christmas without remembering Bethlehem and the shepherds, or Easter without recalling the empty tomb in Joseph's garden, the reading of the account of our Lord's fast of forty days and forty nights and his temptation in the wilderness is an almost universal tradition in the lectionary assignments for this Sunday in the Western Church. It appears in the very first Prayer Book of King Edward VI in 1549 and every one since.

It's unfortunate, in some respects, that tradition has applied the word *temptation* to Jesus' experience, because in our time we tend to associate *temptation* with little things. We say we are tempted to tell a little *white lie*, or to break a resolution about eating or drinking, or some other matter and this is what we mean by *temptation*. We think of temptation as

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involving small things, but what happened to Jesus was no small thing at all, and I think to adequately understand it, we need another term for it.

A better word than temptation, perhaps, is *testing*. Jesus had just been baptized. The Spirit had descended upon him. God had spoken to him. It was a moment of the greatest exaltation of the Spirit, so great that he never again experienced anything exactly like it.

Our own lives include not only a good many little things, but also an occasional great one, which involves us in major decisions. Every major decision subjects us to an experience of testing which reveals not only what we are in our moral character, but also our wisdom and spiritual sensitivity. So, what we are looking for in this story of Jesus is something to help us recognize our own tests as they come to us, how to endure them and how to use them.

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It was not for nothing that Jesus was in the dreaded Judean wilderness called Jeshimon finding the right answers to Satan's suggestions. He did not get these answers off the top of his head, they didn't come readily. He had to dredge them up out of the depths of his convictions and pull them in out of the circumference of all that he knew. And, it's significant that the story does not tell us, in so many words, what the right answers were, but only that those which Satan offered were wrong and so had to be refused.

The first suggestion is that he meet an obvious and universal need for food by turning stones into bread. Here is a test which will do two things at once: if he tries it and it doesn't work, he can be sure he is not the Messiah and he is relieved of further responsibility. If it does work, he will be absolutely sure of his role and his power, and he will have done a good thing in feeding the hungry. He refuses to make the attempt on the ground that *man does not live by bread alone*. The

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essence of this test is to sell God short and settle for less than God's whole purpose for himself and for us.

The second suggestion is that Jesus worship Satan, meaning that he adopt the methods of coercion, fear and power to compel the obedience of mankind to himself and so *force* them into the Kingdom of God. This is a delusion so obvious that Jesus dismisses it with contempt. To accept it would be to place himself, *and us*, not in the Kingdom of God, but in the kingdom of evil, depriving us of our right for responsibility for our own destiny.

The final suggestion is that Jesus establish his authority and claim popular attention by performing a spectacular act, by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in the heart of the city, where everybody could see him do it. Like the first, this test is double edged in that it will settle once and for all who he really is, in his own mind, and in the minds of

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the people, if it works or if it doesn't work. But, he says, that this is to set up a test for God to pass and this is *not* the proper relationship between God and his people. We may not judge God by how well he serves us.

Perhaps we can see in this story that the real test of character always concerns something important, not trivial. The way we behave toward our work is more significant than which flavor of Starbucks we prefer. The way we treat our families, friends and associates shows more about us than whether we hang in with our diet. The way we endure the necessities and face the alternatives of life tells more about our faith than what we say in Church. We are tested, not by the bad things that repel us, but by the kind of good things that attract us and by the way we seek to accomplish good things.

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Finally, every test comes on the heels of a previous test we have met successfully. If you will compare St. Matthew's version of this story with St. Luke's version, which you heard this morning, there is a significant difference. Luke concludes his version by saying, *the devil departed from him until an opportune time*. He didn't say goodbye. He said, *so long, I'll see you later*, implying that the end of the forty days was not to be the end of testing. Indeed, it was not. *Testing, temptation* whatever we call it, is a permanent, recurring experience in human life every time we meet any choice of possibilities. Every time we make a decision, the way we make it shows something about us.

So, the importance of Lent and the importance of this story extend far beyond this present moment. They describe the process in which we live everyday. May they help us pass through our times of testing into a

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more adequate faith in God, and a more profound  
loyalty to him whom we call our Lord and Savior.

**AMEN.**