

Times of Testing

February 21, 2010

St. Paul's - Richmond United Church

First Sunday in Lent

Luke 9:28-36

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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If you have been watching or reading about the Olympics, a constant narrative is this is a time of testing. All the preparation leads up to a moment or moments where the athlete is tested. The outcome leads to another level of testing, which is character. This is how one deals with winning or losing. We can identify with those moments because there are moments in our experience where testing is hard and we find a strength we did not know we had. As well in those situations we have discovered we were not alone for we came through because of others. This has been a recurring response from the athletes. They acknowledge their skill and those who helped develop it.

Then is another type of testing. This is testing the water before we jump in. We use our insights, past histories, the wisdom of others to prepare ourselves for a new situation. We test out ideas to find those which will lead us in the future. There is provisional nature to this testing, for more than one option is open, and we test all the options to find the best.

Within these types of testing there is a temptation that there is a magical solution. We want some magical experience to solve the issues we face. Think of the times when we say, "If only we could do that over again." "If only I had better thoughts." If only. We have been schooled in what is called the magical thinking. Another name for this is Supernaturalism - some force that is not limited by natural reality - an outside force that will save us.

This story of Jesus has all these elements. It is also a confrontation with the Roman Empire and its values. Luke uses the desert moment of Jesus to set his theme of the ministry of Jesus.

It helps to know that the Emperor is also a Son of God. He has supernatural power. Many of the terms used for him were terms that were used by the early church for Jesus. The Emperor had the power of life and death and was expected to bring peace. The kind of peace he would bring came through war and violence. It was a power of conquest. A power of oppression.

Luke sets up the confrontation with the power of oppression with the power of persuasion in the symbols in the story. There is no snapping the finger to make things right. There is no easy solution. No silver bullet. Jesus rejects absolute supernatural power in the rejection of the devil offering "I will give you." The metaphor of the devil is just that, a metaphor for those forces that seek our undoing, the destruction of our humanity.

It is not a real power. So to blame the devil, who does not exist, who has no power, is to give up our power of making things right.

Jesus rejects the offer of the power of force and empire. He rejects that peace comes through oppression and violence. The temptation is to believe that there is a simplistic answer to complex problems. If only we had all the power - boy would things be different. Emperors think they can make the world in their own image. And that image is often violence and force. It is the power to say, "You will do this or else." The threat of destruction does not create a people who love or care for the world, for it is fear based. Jesus rejects all fear based, punishment-oriented power. He shows that the power of God is only one of persuasion.

In temptations we see more clearly a new understanding of Providence. It is a rejection of all supernatural interventions into history. In this story Luke gives us the images of supernatural experience - bread out of stone - and Jesus rejects that path.

There is a new understanding of how God works to achieve peace. The providential nature of God works in the world as it is. It is not a matter of God allowing negativity, it is there, within the world system. God changes reality through persuasion - luring us to love the world. God is the resource for that loving, for God is love. By turning toward God and letting God work through him, Jesus became a force for transformation. In a like manner, when we let God all the way in, we too become a force for transformation.

It is just like raising children. They do not learn through threats. They learn self-confidence by risking with our support. We let them push the boundaries, at times letting them risk failing. However, they learn they are never alone, for we are there to kiss the bruise better, to help them make sense of the experience. The thing they learn is that they are not alone.

The providential nature of God will not magically stop us when we go wrong, However, God is there in the journey with us, luring us. This is the theme of lent, that God suffers with us, feels our pain, bares our brokenness.

When we think with Jesus we know that we can do better. We can realistically look at what we have done, and find the strength in our actions and build on it. We can also look at where we went wrong and learn from that mistake. The providential nature of God is that God works with the world as it is to lure it to where it could be. God luring people to love.

Our world is full of miracles - people who did things that prepared the unexpected outcomes. The Providential nature of God is worked out in those saints who in their quiet way have kept the faith, worked for good. We all have experienced the saints who have claimed us for God, and who are a beacon of light for us. Think of those people who have quiet strength and just go and do love - The parent. The teacher. The friend. The co-worker. Think of them - for they are the signs of the providence of God.

Providence is one of participation. God journeys with, struggles with, offering love in every situation, in times of danger and times rest. We are not alone. Things are not guaranteed in the sense we will escape threats and forces of danger. However, in every moment of life there is a force stronger than death, working at redemption and working toward wholeness. The secret is, is to listen to that force of love, to let it guide us in desert times. It is to develop eyes and ears to the beauty that continues to force its way through the cracks in

existence. It is to water the flowers of life with our anticipation and our love for one another. The light is there, so the trick is to let it in.

Lent is time to practice of the letting in the light, to see the light in the darkness and to know it cannot be overwhelmed.

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