

# "Tempted, Yet Triumphant"

Mark 1:9-15, First Sunday in Lent, February 22, 2015

**A man was walking along a mountain road one day, not really paying all that much attention** to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he was falling, he grabbed a branch growing out from the side of that cliff. Realizing that he couldn't hang on to it for long, he calls out for help: **"Is there anybody up there?"**

"Yes," a voice replied. "Who are you?" the dangling cliffhanger wanted to know. **"The Lord!"** the voice answered. "Lord, help me!" **"Do you trust me?"** asked the Lord. "Yes, Lord, I trust you completely!" **"Good,"** the Lord said, **"then let go of that branch!"**

"What?" the man replied. "I said let go of that branch!"

After a long pause, the man yelled back: **"Is there anybody else up there?"**

**I imagine that there have probably been some times in most of our lives when a challenge that the LORD God was setting before us was just that great!** God was putting a formidable challenge before us, and if we accepted it, this **meant leaving behind every sense of personal security** we were enjoying in our lives up until that point!

**Certainly the Patriarch Abraham was well-acquainted with such tests!** Some of those tests he passed with flying colors and others he failed dismally, but our Old Testament lesson this morning (Genesis 22:1-18) presents us with the **greatest challenge that Abraham would ever face in his whole life.** Concerning this troublesome story, the great commentator **Matthew Henry** one day wrote: **"Never was any gold tried in so hot a fire!"**

Our Old Testament lesson this morning begins with these words: *"After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I!" (v. 1)* This phrase: *"After these things"* takes us all the way back to 10 chapters earlier when God first met **Abram and told him and his wife Sarai to leave behind everything that was familiar to them** and to set out for a new country that the LORD God would give to them, not even telling Abram and Sarai where they were going! God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's descendants, yet Abraham and Sarah remain childless for years! **Of course, like all of us, there are times when they grew impatient with God and take matters in own hands;** a strategy for people of faith that always results in disaster. But finally that day did come when **Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 100 years old and she conceived and bore to Abraham a son; a baby they named "Isaac,"** which means literally **"giggles"** in Hebrew, because Sarah giggled when she first heard the message from the angel sent to Abraham that even at this late stage in the game called life, she would give birth to a son!

Perhaps when you were a student in high school, or college or graduate school, the word "test" conjured up some real nightmares for you! That's why you were up so late burning the midnight oil to memorize volumes of facts, noticing your increased heart rate when the instructor passed out the

“test” to you on the following day. **But even after you graduated from school, whichever school it was, you learned pretty soon that there are all kinds of tests that are given to us in life!**

Still it is important for us to hear what St. James is saying to us in our epistle lesson this morning: *“Let no one say when he is being tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one!”* (James 13)

**What’s the difference? God tests to confirm and strengthen! Satan tempts to corrupt and weaken!** And as St. James in the New Testament God’s great testing of Abraham’s faith he tell us in James 2:2 that God was testing Abraham’s faith so that it could be “perfected” before other people.

**First, let’s remember that the Triune God is always sovereign in everything.** The Triune God is all-knowing in everything. Before God tests Abraham’s faith in such a tremendous, some might even say, “stupendous” way—God knows what the outcome of that day’s events were going to be ahead of time. Nothing ever comes as a surprise to our God!

**Secondly, God did not just know what he was going to do ahead of time! He also knew that Abraham would pass this test superbly with flying colors, when the test would be given to him!**

And don’t we remember Jesus exercising this same kind of omniscience with respect to the challenges, or tests, that he sometimes places before his disciples? **In John 6:6,** *“Jesus said this on to test Philip, for he himself knew what he would do!”*

**Thirdly, let’s remember that Abraham had been walking with God for about 35 years now, before God tested him in this most challenging way!** God did not give this test to Abraham until Abraham was indeed ready for it! One of the great things about God is that he does not give us tests that we cannot pass, though we may sometimes in our unbelief fail to pass them! But listen also to what St. Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 10:13,** *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it!”*

**Fourthly, when God’s calls Abraham by name,** Abraham responds with, **“Here am I,”** both in **verse 1 and verse 11.** Abraham was willing to hear from God, and when he did hear from God, he responded to God’s call and be moved to action!

The human aspects of this story certainly pull on our heart strings!

Abraham's paternal/fatherly love for his son Isaac had to be very, very strong when we remember how for many years Abraham had patiently (and oftentimes not-so-patiently) waited for Isaac to be born!

The expression "your only son" (v. 1) must have also hurt deeply, when we remember that it was shortly after Isaac was born that Abraham was forced to say farewell to his firstborn son, Ishmael; born to him by Sarah's chosen handmaid Hagar; perhaps the first ever surrogate mother!

Knowing how deeply Sarah also surely loved her son Isaac, it takes very little imagination on our part to guess what her reactions would have been to the news of Isaac's death when Abraham got back home!

Who but Abraham would not have argued with God? But Abraham's faith over many years had taught him not to argue with God, but to obey God! Abraham believes that what God commands is good and that God's promises can never be broken! So Abraham rises very early and begins his sad journey; those three days with Isaac in his full view could have only added to his deep personal sense of agony and pain.

But there is one aspect to this story that most of us probably overlook when we read this story found in verse 5, "*Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and we will worship and we will come back to you again!*" as an actual expression of Abraham's own deep personal belief that already then—Abraham fully expected that Isaac, being raised from the dead, would return also back before Abraham's servant with him! **No way, you say! You've never really heard this part of the story before!**

Well if this were merely human beings putting their own spin upon Abraham's words as to what Abraham was really saying, then we might discount them altogether! But listen to what we read in **Hebrews 11:17-19!**

*"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' Abraham considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back!"*

**But it was never really God's intention that Isaac should have been sacrificed by Abraham on Mount Moriah. And it's especially during this season of Lent that the whole Church is being challenged to focus our fullest attention on the Lamb of God which our Heavenly Father did provide to save us from our sins.**

**Just as Abraham was poised with the knife firmly in his hands over Isaac's chest, God interrupted him.** But when the nails were on the palms of our Savior's hands, God the Father did not stop the Roman soldiers from nailing our Savior to the cross. This is the God,

Paul says, "Who spared not his Son but gave him up for us all! How shall he not then together with Christ give us all good things?"

**Listen to what Stuart Briscoe** has to say about our Old Testament lesson today: "Faith is matured through the experience of stressful testing in much the same way that the cardiovascular system is strengthened through exercise and in much the same way that muscles are developed by pumping iron!"

He furthermore says: "If the progress of Abraham's faith could have been drawn on a piece of graph paper it would have looked like the Himalayas (mountain chain), with many staggering pinnacles of trust interspersed with deep valleys of doubt. But towering over the other incidents was Mt. Everest, or to put it more accurately—Mt. Moriah! What took place there stands throughout human history as one of the greatest demonstrations of a man's faith in a faithful God!" (MASTERING THE OLD TESTAMENT: GENESIS, P. 190)

Many people who claim to have faith in God these days do not necessarily have faith in the God of the Bible; the God who is HOLY and RIGHTEOUS as well as LOVING, MERCIFUL AND COMPASSIONATE. OUR HOLY AND RIGHTEOUS GOD SAYS, "YOU MUST BE HOLY AS I THE LORD YOUR GOD AM HOLY!" He must punish sin, but he is also a forgiving and loving God—the only way God could be truthful to himself was to be found at the cross.

**Some people view God as simply a kind, benevolent, old grandfather,** whose main concern is to make everyone feel good about their selves! This God is regarded to be **someone like a recreational director on a cruise ship whose task is to give everyone a good time with no expense spared.**

**When it comes to Jesus's own temptation experience, Matthew and Luke give us far many more details that Mark does who tells us in his customary short and concise fashion:** *"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him!"* (Vv. 12-13)

**Friends, we know that Jesus came into his world, as St. Paul tells us on several occasions, as the second Adam.** Jesus had to be triumphant over the temptations of Satan to fulfill the law of God personally so that he could take our place under the law and offer his perfect life to make a vicarious satisfaction for all of our sins! But the writer of Hebrews also says, such knowledge gives us great comfort because: **We have not a high-priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet never sinned!"** (Hebrews 4:14-15)

And isn't all of this a matter of the **First Commandment?** **"You should have no other gods before me!"** And what does this mean: **"We should fear, love and trust in God above all things!"** But Jesus himself paraphrased that first commandment in a very life applicable way when he said, **"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well!"** (Matthew 6:33).

**Many years ago a king had one beautiful daughter. She had many offers of marriage, but she couldn't make up her mind. A romantic girl, she wanted a man who would love her more than he loved anything else.** Finally, her father the king devised a way to test the love of her suitors. An announcement was made and sent throughout the kingdom that on a certain day, there would be a race. The winner of the race would marry the princess. The race was open to every man in the kingdom, regardless of his position. All that was required was that the man had to profess to love the princess more than he loved anything else.

On the chosen day, men rich and poor gathered for the race. Each professed wholehearted love for the princess. They gathered at the starting line, prepared to run the course of many miles that had been marked for the race. Each man was told that the princess waited at the finish line. Whoever reached her first could take her as his bride.

**Just before the race was to begin, an announcement was made. The king, they were reminded, was a wealthy man with treasures gathered from all over the world. Not wanting any man to run in vain, it was announced, the king had liberally scattered some of his finest treasures along the course. Each runner was welcome to take as many as he liked.**

The race was begun. Almost immediately, **the runners began to come across great gems and bags of gold. There were necklaces and pendants and jewel encrusted cups and swords and knives. One by one, the runners, princes and paupers alike, turned aside to fill their pockets and carry off what treasures they could.** Blinded by the immediate promise of wealth, they forgot the princess and all their professions of love.

All, except one! He pressed on, ignoring what to him were trinkets when compared to incomparable beauty of the princess and the prospect of gaining her hand in marriage, finally crossing the finish line.

That is the way temptation works. It places things in our path meant to blind our eyes to the kind of life God wants us to live and the kind of life that would see knowing Jesus as our Savior and Lord as the greatest treasure in life that there is!

Didn't St. Paul express this all so beautifully one day when he wrote: ***"Whatever gain I had I count as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead!"*** (Philippians 3:7-11) Amen