

“Test the Waters”
First Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Stuart Seelman
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One distinctly modern temptation continues to face me. I thought I would get over it, but I continue to fall for it, again and again.

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Now, what they’re banking on is no secret. Best case, you’ll get heavily invested two seasons in to your new favorite five-season show, so how could you cancel? You’re even more than likely to forget entirely that you’re paying for access to two complimentary audiobook titles out of a catalog of thousands! And it could take a billing cycle or more before realizing, at which point it’s already too late.

I’ve gone to great lengths to get the most out of my free trials. I would diligently write cancellation dates into my calendar. And in college when I wasn’t making the big ministry bucks, I’d even use multiple email accounts to get repeat access to try out all of that content.

These points to a larger trend. From pre-album singles and video game demos to Kickstarter campaigns and political test balloons in the form of news leaks, our culture values dipping our toes in the water, getting to test something out before launch or before we have to make a solid commitment, financial or otherwise. *And don’t even get me started on relationships.*

But while testing the waters in these ways seems like a matter of prudence, it too easily forgets our limitations. Often there is no time or energy to properly try out what we need before we need it. That how committed we are to the thing right from the get-go tells us something of its value, too.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mathew, we find Christ after his baptism, when he was claimed by God and the Spirit descended from above. But now, the Spirit leads him out. From the get-go the purpose of *this* visit is clear: he is to be tested. These baptismal waters are about to be tested.

So, Christ is lead to the desert, the wilderness. The desert is a place of testing, even for testing the waters where there's so little of it.

To the Jewish readers of Matthew, this makes even more sense. The desert was where God's people were tested before they entered the Promised Land. And if you remember the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, they failed the test almost every step of the way.

You could say God is getting her people in early access, before the distractions of other nations and gods, of the abundance of the land and the rule of wayward kings.

And even then, they build a golden calf, and complain and complain and complain. They put God to the test, even more.

At one point, God is fed up and makes a proposal to Moses, "I'll strike them down with a plague and disown them. Then I'll make you into a great nation, stronger than they." But Moses is able to convince God to forgive.

At another, the people set down camp but there is no water to drink. So, they argue with Moses "why did you bring us out of Egypt (just) to kill us?" And God allows Moses to strike the rock and at once water came out from the rock at Massah and Meribah. And God curses them because they asked "is the Lord really with us or not?"

God tested these people out, and the people tested God. It happened time and time again. But now, God is testing the waters. The waters of Christ's baptism.

Both challenge us, they challenge our understanding of how committed God is supposed to be to us, how God will have us, if at all.

The gospels often follow Christ from large public spaces to places of isolation and rest, but this case is different. It's not clear why he needs to be tested this way. This is not a test anyone asked

him to pass. At his baptism in the Jordan River, God didn't say "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him...but before that, he's going to go on an extended wilderness expedition."

Still, led by the Spirit, Christ fasts for forty days and forty nights. For a moment this might just seem how the Son of Man gets fortified in some superhuman training montage kind of way but, no, it says he was famished.

An intentional weakening, for no reason other than to make him more susceptible to the devil's testing. The Son of Man has a heavy golf handicap in the cosmic Masters Tournament of evil and salvation, and he has to drive from a water trap by the tee.

The devil enters, and now he is just named "the tempter." The devil is identified only according to God's purpose but this is little consolation. Because now God's purposes lead Christ to the brink of death, the stuff of the devil.

This point should not be lost on us. This is life and death. Christ answers the first of the devil's temptations, to make food in the desert, by saying that "man cannot live on bread alone." But in his hunger, he's well aware that man needs bread, or something of the sort, to live at all.

The drama only heightens with the second temptation. The devil takes Christ to the top of the Temple, either in a vision or in the flesh, and tells him to jump off.

Regardless of which, the starved Christ has either found himself caught up in the devil's delusions, or the son of Man is asked risk his life for a miracle, as the devil quotes Scripture that angels will deliver him.

The source of our salvation is under attack. Early readers would have felt the terror of that prospect: God might be playing fast and loose with the life of the one who was to save us, before he could ever enter the Holy City. And this goes to other questions at the heart of who God is to us: why does God seem too often to hold our lives on a swinging shoe string? Why does our faith

encounter so many tests and why do we face so much evil and death in this world until we can't tell the difference between the two?

But soon, a recognition starts to occur. In Jesus and us. Because the human Jesus is God incarnate. And he says, "do not put the Lord your God to the test." Do not put Me to the test.

Now God speaks clearly about how God will have us. God won't break God's own rules. In the words of theologian Stanley Hauerwas, "God won't enslave us to a miracle." Instead, God wants our cooperation, our free choice to follow Jesus into life, not death. And this only works if this Jesus in the desert *is* God, if the Spirit who led him there is God, too. Because God is three.

Seeing this recognition, the devil tries a different tact. He takes Jesus to the mountain and offers him rule of all the kingdoms if only he would bow down. Evil is found not just in the hunger of the desert but in respectable power and mob violence, alike. But we won't have God as a conqueror with earthly power in this Christ, as much as we might wish. The son of Man has a deeper power sustaining him past the point of death.

Because God is also one. God won't be set against Godself, with the Son ruling violently against the will of the Father. Nor will God the Father continue to live while the Son is sent out by the Spirit and left for dead.

So, the devil departs. And angels *suddenly* come and wait on Jesus. They were there all along, hidden even to Jesus. God will face down death, even to the point of death. God will face down real temptation, with the possibility of failure, but God will live. God will choose life with us. Because God is life.

These baptismal waters have been tested. Jesus has been tested. This was not just a free trial before his real ministry begins, though further temptations will come.

This event in the desert took place with no human witnesses, but somehow it is now revealed as God's gift to us. We didn't test God. God didn't test us. God tested Godself for us to see, to show us how we will have God, and more importantly, how God will have us.

We will have this God as the humble one who takes on our trials and suffering. He even takes on our temptations to choose easy ways out, magic solutions that come with a human cost, oppressive power and earthly violence. Only God as three-in-one could take this suffering on as a test.

Because in the cross, Christ took on the cost of our salvation. The case of our salvation didn't get hidden in our bank statements for later payment in form of ongoing suffering. And hear this, God does not test you by making you suffer. We do not suffer to earn God's love. That's not how God would have you.

This couldn't be a free trial, either, because the cost has been paid. But that means that baptismal water is not a subscription we can just forget about. It claims us and we can't take it away.

But like Christ, Christians will still face down real trials and temptations beyond the desert. And that's often hard for us to admit, just how much these temptations continue to assail us beyond the desert.

But whatever trials of evil you've been faced with, whatever temptations to settle for something less than life itself, the temptation to prioritize an easy fix over the bread of life, the temptation to disregard the human lives of those around us by expecting a miraculous fantasy, the temptation to rule and lord over and exploit, even in just a very abstract roundabout sort of way.

We don't have to return to the desert to face down Satan one to one. God is feeding us at this table with life itself. God is ever-present, whether we know it or not, and God wills for life, not just a starved imitation of it. In the person of Christ, God emerges from the desert to take us to the foot of the cross where we will find life, not death. Thanks be to God.