

Testing Your Faith February 21, 2021

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The three readings for this week form a complete whole to describe life on this side of heaven. In the Genesis reading we heard how Abraham was put to the test in a trial of his faith. And in the Gospel reading we heard how Jesus was put to the test in His three temptations by the Devil in the wilderness. The Epistle reading ties both trials and temptations together.

Let's look first at the Old Testament reading. You all know that Abraham and Sarah were childless. Yet, at the ripe old age of 75, according to Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that he would have heirs and God would make a great nation from him. Twenty-five years later, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah, his wife, was 90 years old, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham with the birth of their son Isaac. Image how wonderful that birth was to this old faithful couple. But now, in our reading today from Genesis 22, God has directed Abraham to take that same only son to a place of sacrifice, to kill him and burn him on a pyre.

What is wrong with this picture? The message seems to be that our God asks His followers to sacrifice their children. Surely, this would not be the first Bible story to tell in Sunday school or to a new believer. Moreover, if Isaac, the

firstborn of Abraham and Sarah, is to be the first of the great nation God has promised to be Abraham's heritage, if the son is killed who will be left to follow given the ages of his parents? And, what about Sarah? We are not told that Abraham shared with her God's directions, but how would she have felt if she knew? How would she have felt had Abraham fulfilled the words of God. She had waited all these years for a child, and now, God asked for him to be sacrificed? Of course, we all know that the story does not end tragically for any of them. God provides the solution to His testing of Abraham's faith. A ram is made available for the sacrifice in place of Isaac and God's plan for His nation is fulfilled. Now, on the surface, we see the purpose of God for this story. God is testing the faith of Abraham to trust in Him. God was truly testing Abraham's faith in an extraordinary manner. God was asking Abraham to do something that probably none of us would dare think of doing: to sacrifice our only (or any) child. God was testing his faith.

But, in this Lenten season, we see how this story points to the sacrifice of Jesus, who is the beloved Son of God. Except in His story there is no ram as an alternative sacrifice. Jesus is the sacrifice.

Those three days, as Abraham traveled the site of the sacrifice, must have been a gut-retching for Abraham. With each step he came closer to the place of sacrifice and the death of his beloved. But there is a hint in the reading that tells us that even as he moves forward with his heart beating and spirit downcast, in his intense test of faith,

Abraham still put his trust in God. We are told that Abraham took two young men with him and in verse 5, after Abraham has seen the place of sacrifice, he said to the young men, ***“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”*** Notice the implication that both Abraham and Isaac would return from the worship. Amid all the stress and trauma, Abraham still kept his faith. Abraham continued to trust in God. And, with this unwavering faith, God acted and gave Abraham a way out. God gave Abraham the solution while still at the same time fulfilling His word. For his faith, God rewarded Abraham with the continued life for Isaac. What a powerful story for our faith. But even more powerful are the implications of this story. We see how God, Himself, who loved His Son, Jesus, so dearly (calling him His son whom He was pleased) offered him as a sacrifice for each of us on the cross. And we see that there are rewards for steadfast faith from God. These implications are for you and me to remember.

In the Gospel reading today, following Jesus’ baptism, St. Mark says Jesus was driven into the wilderness. Old Testament Israelites associated cultivated and arable land as a blessing, but in contrast the wilderness was associated with being cursed. Jesus has just been baptized and now was designated as the servant, as named by Old Testament prophets, as the Messiah who would save His people. He became our servant to serve us as our Savior and the Savior of the whole world.

The Greek word, “pierazo,” used here, is translated as tempted. This word meant to put something or someone to the test to determine its character. That was the purpose of the test of Abraham. And that was the reason that God had allowed Jesus to be drawn to the wilderness to face Satan. The word used for Satan here is also translated as “adversary.” With the temptations of Jesus, we have the first test in the struggle between Jesus and his adversary, our adversary, Satan, the evil one. Now, while the word “driven” seems like it means that Jesus went against his will into the wilderness, probably outside Jericho, we should think of the meaning as being compelled or motivated, (like when a person is driven or determined to accomplish some act) Jesus was “driven,” determined to overcome the devil, sin that he brought into the world through Adam and Eve and death which is the result of sin. Jesus was submitting to this test of His determination to fulfill the Father’s will through Him. In other words, Jesus gladly submitted to the temptations of the devil in order to subdue Him and fulfill the will of God.

Trials and temptations are not new words to Christians. Is there anyone here who have not had trials in their life? Is there anyone here who has not been tempted in their life?

Trials and temptations often describe our lives. The trials and temptations that we face are similar in that they are both tests. They are tests of our faith in God, tests of our trust in God, tests of our love of God, above all things. Yet, they have different sources. St. James writes, in the second reading, that temptations (which are disobedience to God)

do NOT come from God. Temptations come from our own evil self and are encouraged and provoked by the Devil, the Father of Lies, who is the enemy of God and seeks to lure us into eternal damnation. St. James says that every good gift and every perfect gift is from God. So, trials are from God and His purpose is to strengthen our faith. We face trials, just like Abraham, as tests of faith allowed or sent by God. But the purpose of these tests is for our good and are not meant to lead us into temptation or evil. God uses these tests not only to see us demonstrate our faith but to strengthen our faith, strengthen our trust, and strengthen our love of Him. The outcome of the tests of God are for good. On the other hand, just as was the case with Jesus, the outcomes of temptations encouraged by the devil are evil. God rewards the outcomes of faith even though we often do not see them immediately.

In verse one of the reading from Mark 1, he states: ***“Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters), when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”*** Sounds hard to believe, count it all joy when we have trials. I remember the trials I have had in my life and, at the time, there was no joy. And, yet, looking back on those tests, I can see how God was testing my faith and purifying me to make me more steadfast. That job is certainly not over, so I can expect more of the same and God will expect more of the steadfastness of faith from me. As you reflect on the trials of your life, does that seem the same to you? If not, are you looking at these trials with

a faith perspective? Reflect on these times in which we are in.

Certainly, few Christians seem to get stronger in faith during easy times. Unfortunately, it is the tough times that move us to flee to God and seek Him. We see His hand and we experience God keeping His promises to us as He sustains us in our trials. God did the same for Abraham, He sustained him with the ram and fulfilled the promise to make a great nation from him through his living son, Isaac. God used the trial of Abraham to sustain and strengthen him as the giver of every good and perfect gift.

In the same way, Jesus knew trials of all kinds, not just those He faced in the wilderness as He encountered and opposed Satan. His tests came throughout His ministry. He was confronted by His own family, by the leaders of the church, by being arrested, by being beaten, by being spit upon, by having a crown of thorns impressed upon His head, by being publicly nailed to a cross in total, naked humiliation and pain, by being mocked by the crowds, by being thrust with a spear, and by dying for something He did not do, but for something you and I did. Like Abraham, Jesus climbed the mountain, but there was no ram. He was the sacrifice. Unlike Abraham who was spared the sacrifice of his beloved son, God sacrificed His only beloved Son. And He did it for us. And Jesus knowingly accepted all this for you and me willingly and obediently. You and I were the cause of his pain, suffering, and death because we have not been able to reject the sinful calls of our sinful selves and have succumbed to the temptations of Satan.

What is wrong with this picture? We should have suffered, not Jesus. How could good come from all this? Jesus suffered in our place, but He was faithful to His Father. God sustained Him in His temptations by sending angels to minister to him. God rewarded the suffering He endured in His trials by giving Him the glory of sitting at His right Hand.

What about us? Jesus knows suffering in trials more than any one of us and can sympathize with us. He can give us the strength to endure our trials. He is the one who can bring us through all the trials of this life and, with our steadfast faith in Him, can in the end give us a crown of life. And that crown of life is ours not because of what we have done but because of our faith in what He has done. What He did on the mountain, on Mount Calvary. And that His help to bolster and sustain our faith and our perseverance extends to those times when we are tempted too. We only need to turn to Jesus in prayer, in His Word and in the sacraments for the strength and the power to overcome temptation. Jesus overcame the temptations and the vexations of evil caused by Satan. He did that to save us and to show us His power. Baptized in the waters of faith, we are now children of God. God loves us. We are His special possessions, and He will not let harm come to us. Just as God was there for Abraham with a ram and Jesus with His angels, He is with us through and because of Jesus. All we need to do is trust in Him, have faith in Him, and pray to Him. The one who sent His only Beloved Son to the Cross for us will do no less to preserve us as we face evil from our own sinful selves. He seeks our faith in Him, and He repays it with His mercy and

forgiveness. That makes the picture very clear. Wouldn't you say?

In the name of Jesus and to the Glory of the Triune God.
Amen.