

Trinity United Methodist Church

June 28, 2020

“Getting Testy”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Responsive Greeting

Leader: What does the Lord require of you?

Congregation: To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

L: What does God command of us?

C: To love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

L: God does not call us to ease or to comfort.

C: But to presence, and abundance, and grace in our struggle.

L: Let us worship the God who believes in us, and trusts in us, and abides with us.

C: Let us worship the God who will ask much of us, but will be beside us every step of the way.

Prayer

Let us go to the Lord in prayer. Loving and sustaining God, you call us to follow you in all things, to give up the things we cling to, and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to your purposes. We confess that we don't always find this easy to do. We confess that it is often very difficult to let go of the things we love. But we also know that you never ask more of us than what is possible and that you stand ready at all times to sustain us and to provide everything we need. Give us courage to faithfully follow your lead, even when we cannot see the outcome. Even when the path you call us to seems impossible to comprehend. Help us to trust you in all things, to let go of everything that would stand in the way of wholehearted obedience to you.

During this time of testing, during this time in which we find ourselves, help us to find the

joys, even as we have many concerns. Hear us as we might lift both to you, aloud or in the silence of our hearts at this time. Hear us as we pray these things and more in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray as we say:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-18 (NIV)

1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. **2** Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” **3** Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. **4** On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. **5** He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” **6** Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, **7** Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” **8** Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10** Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. **11** But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. **12** “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” **13** Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.” **15** The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time **16** and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, **17** I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in

the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, **18** and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Sermon

Let us pray. Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

In grade school and on into college and seminary, I generally did pretty well on tests. I wasn't one of those who was affected by test anxiety, and basically, as long as I studied well enough, and I've always had a good memory with that sort of thing, I usually did pretty well. But every once in a while, especially in grade school, the teacher would throw in a different kind of test. One that was the same type of test each time, but which I failed more than once. You put your name at the top, and then the instructions said, “Read all questions before answering any of them.” So you go through and there's word problems and there might be math problems. There might be multiple choice, vocabulary questions and things like that. Teachers are out there snickering; you know exactly what kind of test this is. And then you get to the last question and it says something to the effect of, “If you followed the directions, do not answer *any* of the questions on this test and simply turn in the page with your name at the top.” No wonder some of the other students in the class turned theirs in so fast! I failed that more than once when I was given that test.

It seems that here lately, we've been going through testing that is anxiety producing. We've gone through other parts of this test before, but those tests had pretty clear instructions. Times when we've had economic trouble before—well, tighten up your spending and watch your money more closely. Times in which we've entered into flu season, even if it's reached epidemic levels—well, go and get your flu shot. Even other types of tests that might come to us, such as hurricanes and natural disasters—the instructions are always the same. Be prepared, have a plan.

But a friend of mine likened this pandemic and everything that has followed to a perpetual hurricane, where band after band after band of the storm keeps hitting us in various ways, and it's not letting up anytime soon. In a normal hurricane, we know what to do. We know to batten down the hatches and wait it out, and clean up after the storm passes. But when will this one pass? Not to mention the personal testing and storms that compound the larger storm and testing going on around us. For us as followers of Jesus, where's God in all of this? Is God testing us? Or is all of this some sort of satanic plot? You might think so, depending on which talking head you've been listening to.

Now, some people believe that God doesn't test us. But some TV preachers will just go on and on and on about how, "God just wants to *bless you, bless you, bless you.*" And yes, God wants to bless. But in the blessing, consider that there might actually be testing.

Jesus told the story of the parable of the talents, or the bags of gold, where the master gave each of the servants different amounts of bags of gold, five and two and one, and it would have been easy for them to have thought, "Oh, we've been blessed unexpectedly by the master! We've received a stimulus check! Isn't it wonderful?" And the one who got one instead of five went to them and got jealous; "How come I wasn't as blessed as the other ones? I work just as hard..." They missed the whole point. The point of that story was for the master to test them with what they would do with that blessing.

But then the second erroneous train of thought is often what we say when people are going through hard times. And we mean to encourage them, and we say, "Well, God never gives us more than we can handle." And we mean well. But when we say that to somebody who is drowning in grief and loss or hurting otherwise, it sure *feels* like a lot more than we can handle in the moment. And we might as well be saying to them, "Buck up, buttercup."

Paul says in 1 Corinthians, it's where we get this idea that God might not give us more than we can handle, but it's out of context, and it's not actually what Paul says. He says, "No temptation or test has overtaken you except that which is common to mankind." Wait a minute—everyone gets tested, and more than we can handle. Because it is God who is faithful. He will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear, because when you are tempted, God will also provide a way out, so that you can endure it. When we are tested, God will provide.

And that's what we see in the scripture lesson for this morning. We read that God does indeed test, because God tested Abraham, saying, "Take your son, your only son, who you love—Isaac." Not just *any* son—it could have been Ishmael; God got very specific. "Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." So Abraham and some of his servants and Isaac set out, and on the *third day*—sound familiar?—Abraham sees the spot that God is talking about. He tells his servants to wait, and he makes two statements of faith here. The first one is when he says, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Wait a minute—God gave him pretty clear instructions that he was going to be coming back alone. When you think about statements of faith like that, I don't know about you, but I question—how much does he really believe that, and how much of that is wishful thinking? There are times when I've made such statements of faith to myself and wonder, *do I really believe that, or is that wishful thinking?*

So Abraham makes Isaac carry the wood. And a lot of times we learn these stories in Sunday School, and when I was in Sunday School we still had the felt boards with the punch-out characters. And so often in Sunday School, Isaac is portrayed as a young child, but scholars agree that Isaac could have been as old as 20 by this point. It is as much a testing of Isaac as it is a testing of Abraham, because Isaac could have said, “No. I’m not going with you.” Isaac could have revolted and run back. Isaac, in the very moment, could have turned the knife on his aged father.

But Isaac simply asks the question: “Um, Dad...Where’s the animal for the sacrifice? We’ve got everything else, but it looks like you forgot something.” And Abraham makes his second statement of faith: “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the beautiful thing about the Hebrew here is that the original text had no punctuation, no commas. So it can be translated in different ways. It might be translated as, “God will provide the lamb, my son, for the burnt offering Himself.” And it could even be translated as, “My son, God will provide Himself, the Lamb, for the burnt offering.” It all gets at the same thing—that no matter what the test, God will provide. Even, and no matter what the testing, God will provide.

And a lot of times when I thank God for his provision, my followup prayer is, “God, thank you for your provision. Could you be a little earlier with it next time so I don’t worry as much?” Because God is always right on time, but he’s hardly ever early, and it sure would be nice if God were a little earlier, wouldn’t it be?

But God is always right on time. Isaac is laid out on the wood. Abraham takes that knife in hand, and right at that moment, God intervenes and provides the ram in the thicket. So Abraham called that place, “The Lord will provide.” Even in the testing, God will provide.

Last week I shared about a picture, where oftentimes so many modern-day Christians think that this is a test on social media. Remember, part of last week’s passage said, “If you’re ashamed of me in the midst of this generation, then I’ll be ashamed of you in the age to come.” So Christians copy and paste that verse taken out of context and they share this picture of “Jesus,” with “If you don’t also share this picture of ‘Jesus,’ Jesus will deny you.” Friends, I said last week, this isn’t even Jesus. This is Obi-Wan Kenobi from one of the early Star Wars movies, okay? Besides, especially in light of recent discussions in our society, Jesus was not blonde-haired and blue-eyed. He was Palestinian. That’s where he was from. That’s not a test—whether or not we re-post Christian cliché.

When has your faith been *really* tested? Maybe it’s when coworkers or classmates have been joking around, making jokes at the expense of others. Do you

laugh along nervously, or outright? Or do you ignore, or do you speak up and say something? Even if it means being ostracized from that group?

Maybe you're working hard, you're paying bills, and you don't have two pennies left to rub together, but you sense the Lord calling you to give extra, so you give to someone else who might not even look like they're in need. Maybe you've got your own health crisis or a family health crisis, let alone this whole pandemic. How will we respond?

Jason Vickers, who is a theologian at Auburn, tells a story about when he was traveling in the Middle East. He was returning through Egypt at a time when Egypt broke out in social unrest. He said there were bombs exploding all around his hotel, gunfire in the streets outside. So he found himself on his knees and taking cover, but also praying and praying. He said that he told God that God had to get him out of there, because he had young children at home and his children needed him. He said in the midst of all that turmoil, God basically knocked him upside the head and said, *What about this thing you did with them called baptism? Do you remember? Did you not give them over to Me in their baptism, when I claimed them as My own children? Do you not think that I will look after them and provide for them if you die? Where is your faith?*

Where has your faith been truly tested, and how did the Lord provide? And in the test, did you read all the way to the end? Because in the end, you see, friends, we don't need to worry for our children or each other or ourselves any longer, especially in God's name. For it is God, the Father, who provided the Lamb, His Son, Himself, for the final offering once and for all.

Furthermore, in the testing and provision, God doesn't always provide like we might think or wish or pray that He would. One of the most faith-testing experiences that I have had in my career in ministry was the year of planting a church outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. Never tell God where you will "never go," especially as a Hokie. I thought back to John Wesley; "I've gone to convert the heathen," there. But in that church planting year—let's face it, when the church sanctuary is full, it makes the preacher feel good, but when we had the same 10 people week in and week out and upwards of 50 people I'd been out inviting that week didn't come, it hurt. So it was one particular Sunday in January when there was enough snow cover on the ground to just barely turn the ground white, but one of those snow days that, let's face it, a lot of church people will find *any* excuse not to come to church, especially weather-related. So I said one of those Abraham-like faith statements out loud: "You know what, God is going to bring us our biggest congregation yet on a snow day. Because only God can do that." And I had that thought that I expressed earlier of, "All right, guys, was that just wishful thinking, or do I really believe that?"

We moved into a church that had previously closed, and there was an existing church right across the street. I'd stand there every Sunday—it really wasn't good for me—and watch car after car coming down the road, and at the last second they'd turn left into the church across the street. Then there was another car coming down the road and all of a sudden—wait! They're turning right! Into our driveway! All right, yeah! And this couple came in, John and Carla, and they were the only new people that showed up that Sunday. We had 12 instead of 10. But let me tell you, God did end up bringing the increase on a snow day, because John and Carla invested themselves so much into the life of that church. They brought new people into that church. They're still actively involved there. And only God could make that kind of connection on a snow day, and provide.

That last Sunday there—the pressure of the conference was intense. It's always pretty intense. I was being moved to another appointment. And on the last Sunday there I was feeling a bit like a failure. And we turned to communion that we served every Sunday in that church. When you come forward, if for some reason you don't want communion on that Sunday, instead of holding your hand out for the bread, you could simply cross your arms and receive a blessing. There was the wife of a person there. She had been coming for a year and we had had conversations. She had belief in this higher power but she wasn't really sure about this Jesus thing, faith in Jesus, etc. So every week she would come and receive a blessing. And it got to be this routine where, when you serve, you get the next piece of bread ready to go for the next person, but it became, “Oh, it's you,” so I'd put the bread back and give her the blessing. Well, that last Sunday, that same interaction started to happen. “Oh, it's you,” and I put the bread back. But instead of crossing her arms, she held out her hand, and I served her the body and blood of Christ. And after church that morning she came up to me and said, “You know, I'm still not sure I get it, this faith in Jesus thing. But I feel like I'm getting there.” I said, “Welcome to the club, because we're all still getting there.”

Even in the testing, God is faithful, and God will provide. Because I didn't have one thing to do with either of those instances. Only God's grace working in us and through us and around us.

You know, when we think of the faith of Abraham and these great saints of the faith, most days we might think that we have that strong of a faith. We'd like to think we have that strong of a faith. But I'll be the first to admit, actually more days I don't. This pandemic and what's followed has exposed a lot of things for us as individuals, as families, as a church; God knows, as a nation. Maybe God is using this time to test us. Maybe God is using this time to draw us back to God and to provide in ever-new and miraculous ways for us.

So, in the testing, let's make sure that we listen to the teacher. Let's make sure that we follow the directions all the way to the end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray. God, we confess that at least deep down inside of all of us, there's at least a little control freak somewhere in there. And for some of us, we're just big old control freaks. It's hard to give up our own reliance on ourselves and instead to rest and to be buoyed by your grace. Help us to trust, especially when so much seems uncertain all around us. Forgive us if we fail this particular test, whatever it is. In your grace, pick us up and dust us off and help us in the next test. For these things and more we pray in the name of Christ, our Lord and Savior, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Benediction

Go in peace in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and let us trust as we've never trusted before. Let us be buoyed by His grace and His love. Amen.