

There Will Be a Test
Mark 1:9-15
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I've done a fair amount of teaching during my time as a pastor – Bible studies, new member classes, confirmation. One of my favorite things to do toward the end of a series of classes is to announce, “There will be a test on the materials we've covered.” I'm joking, of course, but class participants never know that for sure. Evidently there's a twisted side of me that loves to see people squirm. And every once in a while, in response to my announcement, someone will raise their hand and ask the \$64,000 question: “What if I fail?”

There will be a test! I wonder if Jesus was thinking about that as he was leaving home. He'd grown up in the backwater town of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter. The gently rolling hills of Galilee were lush with crops and olive trees. The shimmering Sea of Galilee was nearby. As I picture the moment, Jesus probably walks right by the shores of the sea on his way to the Jordan River. He's going to the Jordan to get baptized by his cousin John. When he sees John, Jesus wades out into the river. A dove descends. There's a resounding voice from heaven: “You are my beloved Son. I'm very pleased with you.”

Now what's going to happen? You guessed it, *there will be a test*. It's off to the *wilderness* for this newly baptized Son. And notice that the Spirit doesn't politely invite Jesus into the wilderness. No, it “drives” him there. And there's no stopping at REI for supplies. Jesus spends the next 40 days out in the middle of nowhere, under the harshest of conditions, with little or nothing to eat. The only voices he hears are the ones inside his own head, God and Satan tugging at him from opposite directions. This testing is setting the stage for what sort of Son Jesus will be. At this point, his future is anything but clear. I wonder if Jesus ever thinks like we do: what if I fail?

We've entered the season of Lent. It's meant to be a little like Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness—a testing time. Lent is a season with ancient roots. That's because, little by little, Jesus' early followers became ho-hum about their faith. They got devoted to their creature comforts instead of their core values: a soft couch, flannel sheets, a roasted leg of lamb. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian. And before long,

it was hard to separate these new Christians from the population at large. On top of everything, they weren't known for their deep and abiding love for each other and for the people around them. They weren't getting arrested for telling the good news of Jesus. No, they blended in. They decided to be nice instead of holy. And I have a sneaking suspicion that God watched it all and groaned!

So, the early Church introduced something called Lent. It came from a word meaning *spring*. It was meant to be a springtime of the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system. Forty days to see what remains after all creature comforts are stripped away. Forty days to remember what it's like to live by the grace of God alone and not by our own wits. *There will be a test*, we hear in the season of Lent, to see what sort of disciples we will be. Hmm, so what will happen if we fail?

What our time in the wilderness often demonstrates—especially if we try to give up something for Lent—is that 98% of us are addicted to one thing or another, whether it's caffeine or candy, shoes or shopping, popcorn or Pepsi, TV or alcohol, blaming or gossiping. Please hear what I'm saying: the simplest "Lenten" definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill up the empty space inside of us that God wants us to reserve for God alone.

Thus, during Lent we go on a spiritual journey to see what we can do about cleaning up the messiness inside of us—with God's help, of course. To enter the wilderness is to try to leave behind all those extraneous things that tend to crowd into that space.

In the wilderness, one of the big questions we face is: "Where are you, God?" Sometimes we ask that question because we need God's help, and at other times we ask it because we don't really want God around.

Dallas Willard makes this point in a story about a two-and-a-half-year-old girl named Larissa. One day in the backyard, Larissa found a puddle of water and soon discovered the secret of making mud. She called it "warm chocolate." Her grandmother had been reading a book and not paying much attention. But after cleaning up the muddy mess, she told little Larissa not to make any more chocolate. Grandma then turned her chair around so she could pay closer attention.

The little girl soon resumed her "warm chocolate" routine, with one request. She posed it as sweetly as a two-and-a-half-year-old could possibly put it:

“Don’t look at me, Nana. Okay?” Nana agreed, probably against her better judgment. Larissa continued to make warm chocolate. Three times she said, “Don’t look at me, Nana.” Dallas Willard concludes: “The tender soul of a little child shows just how often we try to hide our messes.”

I think Dallas Willard is onto something here. The first words spoken by Adam after he and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit was: “God, I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid....so I hid.” *Don’t look at me, God.*

A salesman on the road checks into a motel room late at night. He knows the kinds of movies that are available. No one will know. *Don’t look at me, God.* A mom with anger issues regularly berates her children because she’s frustrated with them, but she doesn’t think she needs help for it. *Don’t look at me, God.* A student is worried about his grades and so sneaks a peak or two at somebody’s paper during an exam. *Don’t look at me, God.*

Friends, *there’s going to be a tes!* Often that test comes in the form of an everyday choice, a kind of character-forming choice we make when we think that no one is looking. We forget that God is looking. *What if we fail?*

Sometimes the tests in the wilderness are just the opposite. We desperately want God’s presence, but God seems nowhere to be found. We pray for a job but nothing materializes. We plead for a loved one to be healed, but she continues to get worse. We pray for help with depression, but the heaviness persists. God, are you there? Do you care? Please help me!

These wilderness tests can come at any time, mind you. We don’t have to wait for Lent. Marlene Lindely of Good Shepherd had a stroke on January 9. She’s given me permission to tell a bit of her story. Marlene felt a sudden flash, and then she felt pain radiating down her left side. She was going to clean the windshield on her car, but she couldn’t get her left glove on. She called her daughter, Sharon, and said she thought she was having a stroke. An ambulance was summoned. In short order, they were on the way to the hospital in Mankato.

Marlene is now in rehab at Good Samaritan in Albert Lea. It sounds like wilderness time to me. Occupational therapy, physical therapy, and lots and lots of alone time. Marlene is used to being busy, and she loves it, but now she is not. Things are getting better slowly, she says, but it’s taking lots of time – too much time!

It's wilderness time. It affects all of us differently. We might have to learn to walk all over again. At times we can feel God's presence, but at other times we can't. Hard as it is to say this, I'm convinced that God often declines to make it easy for us. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe because God wants us to grow through these tough times. God wants us to learn to trust him. God wants us to do a better job of listening..

Rick Warren writes: "Life is a series of problems. Either you're in one now, you're just coming out of one, or you're getting ready to go into another one. The reason for this is that God is more interested in your character than your comfort; God is more interested in making your life holy than in making it happy." Says Warren: "We can be reasonably happy here on earth, but that's not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is to become more like Christ."

No doubt, at some time or another, *there will be a test*. For Jesus, that means 40 days alone in the wilderness. He finds out what sort of Son he will be. He finds out that he can't be God's Son without hunger and pain and—especially—a cross. The good news is, Jesus does not fail his test. He stays faithful all the way through to the end. Therein lies our hope.

Friends, you and I will face tests of our own this Lent. Maybe you're in one now. Unlike Jesus, we're probably going to fail some of them. Sometimes we're going to fill up our empty places with junk food; we're going to hurt those we love; we're going to fall flat on our faces. But rest assured, Jesus will be there to help us back on our feet again and to send us on our way. He will be there to forgive us. He will be there to love us because God's love always makes a way.

Could it be that the real value of the wilderness, the value of being put to the test, is not whether we pass or fail, but whether we grow from the experience and become the disciples we are meant to be? I think so. It's testing time! Amen.