

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
March 15, 2020 – 3rd Sunday in Lent, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT READING Exodus 17:1-7

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

NEW TESTAMENT READING Luke 11:1-5

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "**When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.**"

SERMON *The Time of Trial* Rev. Martin McGeachy

Our New Testament reading this morning is one of two places in Scripture that records Jesus teaching his disciples to pray, with words that have come to be named the Lord's Prayer. Our version is from Luke, an abbreviated instruction, but nothing is left out of it. It's in Matthew 6 that we get our more familiar prayer, the same content but more poetic phrases, which is ironic given that in Matthew Jesus includes the teaching that we should avoid heaping up empty phrases that can be meaningless. Like many of you, I don't believe Jesus was telling us to memorize his words to create for the rest of eternity a prayerful singalong, but I don't think he's against what it's become, as long as our prayer is from the heart, and as long as we don't forget the lesson behind his teaching, which is simple. When we pray, acknowledge God as our source of giving, the wonderful Lord of all that is; pray for God's will to be done, and that our needs for the moment be met; forgive us (and this is an interesting nuance in Luke's version, forgive us BECAUSE we forgive others—there's an assumption we have done that first); and finally, do not bring us to the time of trial, as Luke calls it, or into temptation, as Matthew says. And that requires a little unpacking.

In the Bible, *Temptation* is a word used to include all kinds of testing we face. And we are told that God leads us into these times. Sometimes I think God takes us by the hand and pulls us there, or drives us into the wilderness, as God did Jesus in his temptations in the wilderness. Sometimes we put ourselves into our time of testing and challenge through our own bad or willfully sinful decisions, when we are choosing not to live by the Spirit. And sometimes Stuff Happens. I do believe in random blessings and trials, not sent specifically

by God as teaching or punishment, but because God created this world beautifully, with happy and unhappy surprises, with pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, a system of nature and free will that brings us into the time of testing; and because all is created by God, God has led us there. And God can lead us out, if we keep our faith there.

Every test is an opportunity. Will we fold under pressure and become fearful, bitter, angry, and decide that there is no God, or will we stand firm on the rock that gives water in the desert, and find God in the testing? Find the blessing, even as we work to move beyond the trial.

This awful Coronavirus is a time of testing, trial, time in the wilderness. I'm not saying necessarily that God smote the earth with plague to eradicate the evil therein. (Assuming that the evil are the elderly and the immune compromised?) No, God has created a world in which nature acts as nature acts, and disease and death have a place in our theology, for without the existence of the concept of loss and pain, we would have no context for understanding, or indeed feeling, love or pleasure. And so we remind the faithful that the loss we feel is only temporary. God has promised victory in Christ. But right now, we're feeling it, and that feeling is palpable, even if we believe in another life beyond this one.

What will we do with our time in the wilderness? Hoard all the sanitizer and sell it for \$500 on Amazon? We may be afraid, and anxious. We may be in pain. We may be terrified. But God will redeem our pain, if we put in the work, if we put in the faith. We'll get water from the rock—the rock of our salvation. Remember, outside our locked doors where we're practicing social distancing, a HUGE trial for the Christian, and indeed every human, for we are wired (and called) to be with one another--Look outside. Spring is arriving, the flowers are blooming. It's beautiful. Easter is coming, and has come, and will come.

Our testing, of course, may not be the virus. You may be facing loss from some other disease, or your loss happened long ago, and you feel the emptiness as keenly today as the day you said goodbye. Maybe you're achingly lonely, or maybe you feel suffocated by those around you and you wish you could be alone. Maybe you have a child with addiction, and a flu bug epidemic is the least of your worries. Your job may be stressing you with unendurable load. Whatever. As the teenagers say. *Whatever.*

Well, as the boomers reply to the teenagers, *Get over it.* Look for the light. I love the posts on Facebook and Instagram that are captioned *Catching the Light*, in which people take photos of beautiful lighting they find in nature. Here's some light to catch: Reach out. Communicate with your neighbor; see who needs help; pray, and stay positive. Even if you don't feel it. Tests show a smile can change our mood even if we do it artificially.

In our Old Testament passage, we read that they tested God. Most of us can guess how God felt with all the grumbling and murmuring from the Israelites, who had been led out of Egypt accompanied by a multitude of amazing miracles. Have you ever said to your complaining, whining child, *Don't test me!?* The trial for God is when we refuse to see that we've been released from slavery, and instead focus on how sparse the desert seems, because we haven't arrived at the promised land yet. Paul refers to these Israelites, and by extension, us, in 1 Corinthians 10:9-13:

⁹ *We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.* ¹⁰ *And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.* ¹¹ *These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.* ¹² *So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.* 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.*

Two weeks ago, during the Confirmation Retreat out at Holmes, we took the confirmands on a hike around that amazing camp, on a lovely, sunny day. But in its winter bleakness, devoid of any green, it occurred to me that it was a lovely wilderness. The wilderness can be beautiful--but it certainly wouldn't seem so, if I were lost there, or hurt my ankle and fell alone. That's when we try to remember that we're never alone, never lost, not truly. Not when the wild beasts are attacking, nor when we're out of water—both Jesus and the Israelites faced those tests, and God came through for them.

How might God come through for us in this testing? What if a result of being stuck in your house with those kids driving you crazy is new family fun? (Family puzzle time? A mandatory joyous dance once every two hours? Teaching the kids to cook?) What if a result of this virus test is a renewed sense of global community and empathy? All over the world, we see people suffering from the same threat. As we see the stock market tumble, and look at the supply chain of our incessant material abundance breaking its links, we realize how connected we are. Water in the desert of testing.

Sure, we're supposed to stay away from one another, but at the same time, we're going to have to pull together. I remember after 9/11, the one positive ray of light in that terrible time was the way we as a people were unified, the way New Yorkers rushed in to help at the risk, and indeed the loss of their lives, the way people lined up immediately to hand out water, give blood, pour through the rubble. And together, together with God, we got through that.

As our church seeks to reach out online, step up our telephone calling and snail mail, we improve our communication with one another—may this be a reward we receive from the time of testing.

When we pray not to be brought to the time of trial, we don't mean *Don't ever let anything bad happen to me.* We mean, when the inevitable challenge strikes, *Help me rise to the occasion, and live in the solution. Help me to rely on You, Loving Lord, trusting that you'll provide water in the desert. Help me to bring that living water to my neighbor. And they, and You, and I, will reach the promised land together.*

Amen.