

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**“The Blue Book”**

**February 21, 2010**

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**Luke 4:1-13**

***The Temptation of Jesus***

*4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’*

*5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’*

*9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, <sup>11</sup>and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ <sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

An old *Guideposts* magazine tells of a Native American legend. While preparing for manhood, the young men of a certain village would go away into the wilderness for a time of solitude. One such youth hiked into a beautiful valley, resplendent with green trees and bright flowers. There he decided to fast for three days. On the third day he noticed in the distance a tall rugged mountain peak capped with snow. He wondered what it would be like to be atop that mountain and so he decided to test himself against that summit. He put on his warmest shirt, tossed a blanket over his shoulders, and set off to climb the mountain.

When he reached the top he stood on the rim of the entire world. He could see forever. His heart swelled with pride at the grandeur of his accomplishment. Just then he heard a rustle at his feet and looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move the snake spoke to him, "I am about to die. It is too cold for me up here atop this mountain. There is no food and I am starving. Put me under your shirt and take me back down to the valley." The wise youth was skeptical. "No," he said. "I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite and your bite will kill me." The snake pleaded, "Oh no. I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you." The youth resisted for a while longer but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the young man tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the green grass. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and sprung, biting the young man on the leg. The youth was shocked. "But you promised you won't bite," he said. The snake answered, "You knew who I was when you decided to pick me up."

The Scripture lesson for the first Sunday in Lent is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It has always seemed to me rather strange that immediately after the confirming event of his baptism Jesus is driven out to the wilderness for forty days to confront a harrowing test. But the story is consistent with others who have prepared to embark upon a spiritual quest. There is some kind of confrontation with spirit or beast in some kind of wilderness. There is a testing of identity and a temptation that defines purpose.

According to the gospels, Jesus was tempted in at least three ways. He was enticed to satisfy all of the physical needs, to turn stones into bread. He was lured by power, to rule over every land and all people. He was coaxed to separate himself from God, to question and even disprove that it was God's power at work in him.

Each and every week, when we pray the words of The Lord's Prayer, we repeat this phrase, "Lead us not into temptation." Oh God, please keep us away from those things which would tempt us, that would lead us astray! Yet even as we are taught to pray for avoidance of temptation, Jesus is led directly into it, apparently by God. What we seek to sidestep, Jesus openly confronts.

Author Randy Cross writes of the difference between the words testing and temptation. The word test comes from an ancient word for the vessel or cup in which someone would place a mineral to assess it through heating and fire. A test therefore is a well-crafted experiment to see if something or someone is authentic. Testing creates a standard to measure how true and accurate something really is.

Temptation is a different animal. Temptation is an enticement that is designed to destroy. The purpose of temptation is breakdown. Testing creates a standard to measure authenticity while temptation designs a scene to cause failure. In the wilderness, Jesus was tempted and tested. While the devil may have been tempting Jesus to deny the power of God in him, God was testing Jesus as to the authenticity of his purpose. Perhaps it is the testing that is more important in this story than the temptations. While we pray to be delivered from temptation, our faith is always tested by our everyday human experience.

The other night I was sharing with Amelia the details of my extraordinary achievements in my college Supreme Court and Civil Liberties classes. I told her that I enjoyed classes where the tests were essay exams, one or two questions instead of

multiple choice. She thought I was crazy. But I always felt that through essays questions, I was tested on what I knew rather than what I didn't know. I loved to pick up the blue book and begin to fill its pages with ink. It gave me a feeling of accomplishment. I felt I was being tested for how well I had integrated the facts I had learned rather than tempted to see how well I could guess or surmise something.

When we hear the word "temptation" we think of the devil and angel, making their arguments on the shoulder of a cartoon character. We have come to see temptation as an enticement to make an error or a mistake, a wrong turn in our normally sound judgment. The idea of temptation tends to trivialize things, to present sin as something outside of us that comes along and moves us to violate what we know to be true and good. But Jesus' experience in the wilderness was not that kind of thing. Jesus wasn't faced merely with black and white choices in which he was tempted to make the wrong decision. Jesus was tested. The very essence of his self, his relationship to God, his faith, and his purpose was being examined. In the wilderness, the core of his very soul was under the microscope, discovering what he really believed about himself and how much he really trusted God.

Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness was a time to be strengthened in faith. It was a time in which he could answer honestly the questions of his own faith. These forty days are to serve the same purpose for us. They are a time of testing, of honest examination. It is a time in which we step away from the easy answers and the assumptions about our God and our faith, assumption we hold without really owning them. It is a time to test what we believe, to let the deeper questions of life touch our souls, to discover what we really believe and in whom and in what we really place our ultimate trust.

Lent isn't a time for a multiple choice quiz. It is an essay exam. It is blue book season. Sharpen the pencils of your heart and soul! It is time to be tested.