

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The Heart of the Matter: A Heart Tested”

Rev. Amy Morgan

February 14, 2016

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

There's this great book called “F in Exams: The Very Best Totally Wrong Test Answers.” The front cover shows the image you see there in your bulletin. A triangle with the length of two sides given and the third side labeled with an x . The test question says, “find x .” One might be expected to go about solving the mathematical equation using the Pythagorean theorem, but the student on this test has circled the x and written, “here it is!”

Totally wrong answer, but also totally true.

This is the kind of test answer Jesus is dealing with in his encounter with the devil in the wilderness.

Now, this word, “devil” in Greek means “slanderer,” someone who takes the truth and twists it, who misuses the truth for nefarious purposes. So from the outset, we know Jesus is being tested by one who will substitute easy truth for hard truth, someone who will circle the x and say “here it is” instead of completing the math equation. We are witnessing a battle between two kinds of truth as Jesus is tested in the wilderness.

The first question on this test is: how does the Son of God satisfy hunger? In his baptism, Jesus is named as the Son of God, and here in the wilderness, he must claim that identity. He shows us what it means to be the Son of God not just in word but in action. Does the Son of God do the hard work to get at the real truth, or does he just circle the x say, “here it is”?

After 40 days of fasting, upon which we base our 40 days of Lent, Jesus is surely hungry. Truly hungry. The temptation to turn stones into bread is not a test to see if Jesus can determine wants from needs. The 40 days of fasting are over. Jesus has shown that he can prioritize God over anything else, including his bodily needs and desires. And what Jesus has learned in this hard work of fasting is that one can be rich in things but poor in spirit. He has learned that he can meet his own needs and desires and never be satisfied, or he can live in reliance on God and be truly satiated.

Now, what the devil is asking, that Jesus feed himself when he is truly in need of nourishment, is not a bad thing. We might choose to fast during Lent not because Jesus refused to turn stones into bread but so we can learn what he learned in the 40 days before this temptation episode. Jesus knows that the body needs food, but the Son of God does not satisfy hunger by relying on his own power and capabilities.

Jesus knows that food brings people together. Twice in the gospel of Luke, large, hungry crowds surround Jesus and, through the miracle of community, a small amount of food, a meager sacrifice, feeds thousands.

Jesus uses food to bring his disciples together in an act of remembrance that will nourish the church and all of Christ's followers forever.

So how does the Son of God satisfy hunger? Not by turning stones into bread. By turning ordinary people into a community of compassion. By turning bread and wine into spiritual nourishment.

The next question on Jesus' test is: how does the Son of God rule the world? I'm hopeful we can all agree that a world ruled by the love and justice of God is preferable to one ruled by a slanderous devil. (I have no comment on which of the current presidential candidates best fits that description.)

But here again, Jesus shows us that the Son of God does not pass the test by taking the easy way. God's love and justice are not brought to life through an idolatrous power grab. The gospel of Luke is chock-full of illustrations of the kingdom of God. It belongs to the poor and to children; it is accompanied by healing; it is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree to shelter the birds of the air, like yeast that leavens the bread; it will include all of those who have been excluded.

"Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

You have to do the hard work to experience the kingdom of God, to discover it in our midst. You can't just circle the x and say, "here it is!"

The final question on Jesus' test is: how does the Son of God trust God? This is the "double-dog-dare you" test, and at this point it seems almost comical. What does Jesus need to prove? What could possibly entice him to throw himself off the top of the temple to see if God will catch him?

Well, let's think about this for a minute. Whose idea was it to test Jesus in the first place? The text says that he was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The devil may be a liar, but this is God putting Jesus to the test. After 40 days of fasting, after turning away from the temptations of self-reliance and idolatrous power, now Jesus is being asked to resist turning the tables on God, putting God in the hot seat, putting God to the test.

This test, while ridiculous, is the most important and most difficult of all. Because God will not ask Jesus to do something as simple or as pointless as jumping off the temple. Oh no. God will send Jesus to the cross. Jesus must trust God to do more than save him from dying. He must trust that God can bring life out of death. And throwing himself senselessly from the temple roof will not accomplish that. Only giving himself up to die on a cross for the love of the world will do that. Only love can bring life out of death. And Jesus trusts in that love with all his heart.

These tests are not designed to see if Jesus will choose the “right” answer. Because these tests are designed to test Jesus’ heart, not his head. Jesus will feed the hungry, but he will give them more than bread. He will give them the ability to be his hands and feet in the world. Jesus will rule the world, but only by inaugurating the reign of God’s righteousness and peace. Jesus will trust God without testing God, going to the cross with full confidence in God’s power and God’s plan.

God is not interested in testing our knowledge of God – who God is or what God wants or how God works. Those answers will not help us form our identity or clarify our mission. To do that, our hearts must be tested. And the test of the heart goes beyond right answers, and it certainly requires more than easy answers. To pass the test of the heart, you cannot circle the x and say, “Here it is.”

Someone said to me this week, “It’s too easy to be a Christian.” And perhaps he is right. But Lent is a time to remember that it is not, in fact, easy to be a Christian. For it means we must follow Christ through that wilderness preparation. We must allow our hearts to be tested. We must do the work that leads to the true answer, not the easy answer.

It is so tempting to just circle the x. Especially when we feel somewhat capable, righteous, and secure.

After the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, they came to the edge of the Promised Land, a land where they imagined they would be prosperous and joyful. After being fed manna in the wilderness by God, they would be able to produce their own food, turn stones into bread. After receiving the law of God and learning to live by it through their journey out of slavery, they felt equipped and possibly entitled to rule the land they were about to enter. After being rescued from the powerful hand of Pharaoh, they felt somewhat invincible.

It is with these attitudes and experiences in mind that Moses instructs the people to give the first fruits of the land to God and to remember that “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor.”

This practice of sharing the bounty reminds them that the people of God are always fed by God, whether it is manna from heaven or crops from their own toil. They remember that they do not live by bread alone, but by breaking bread together in community and in remembrance.

The ancestor who was a wandering Aramean reminds them that God is the one who has made them a great people and who will rule the land they are about to enter. God will not rule with the oppression of Pharaoh but with justice and peace. Both the law of Moses and the repeated narrative of exodus from Egypt illustrate the kind of society the Israelites are to establish. A society that cares for the sojourner and the foreigner. A society that looks after the poor, the orphan, and the widow.

The Israelites trust in God’s past faithfulness enough to give up the first fruit of the land. Not the leftovers. Not the surplus. Not a percentage. The first fruit. Without knowing how much more the land will produce. Without data about how much they will need. Without certainty that devastation won’t befall the rest of the

crop. The Israelites trust God with their survival. They trust in the one who has brought them up out of slavery and sustained them through their desert wanderings.

Jesus' 40 days of fasting helped him understand what it means to be the Son of God. And the Israelites' 40 years in the desert helped them understand what it means to be the people of God. Both of these experiences were preparation, study, for the test that came next. Not a test of knowledge, but a test of the heart, a test to see if they really understood their identity and their mission.

Meaninglessness is one of the greatest psychological struggles of our society. We are people without identity and without a mission or purpose. We consider ourselves to be fairly capable, moral, and prosperous. We can feed ourselves and our families. We can make good decisions in leading our families, our church, our companies. We can protect ourselves with security systems and seatbelts, screening processes and military spending.

But what we can't do is give ourselves an identity and a mission. We can circle the x and say, "here it is," but we never really take the time to find the definition, the meaning, of x. When the world is coming at you at 140 characters and thousands of images a day, who has the time for the hard work, the time-consuming work, the slow work, of becoming a community of compassion, of paying attention to acts of remembrance, of living in the kingdom of God, of trusting God to bring life out of death? These are not easy tests. Not for us.

Not when you have a devil, a slanderer, who says, "you can make something out of nothing, you can provide for yourself, you don't need God or others." A slanderer who will say, "worship power and wealth and fame instead of God." A slanderer who will say, "if God doesn't give you what you want when you want it, if God can't be tested like gravity or photons, then what's the point?" A slanderer who tempts us to just circle the x and move on to the next text, tweet, photo, or newsfeed.

The gift of this season of Lent is that we are given the opportunity to remember who we are and why we are here. We have the chance to go, in the strength of God's Spirit, into that wilderness of testing, hearing the slander, the false truths, for what they really are. In our 40 days of preparation, we are invited to slow down, serve others, break bread together, see the kingdom of God in the poor and in children, in those who have been excluded, not here and there but everywhere. We are invited to trust God with our first fruits, our best time of day, the height of our energy and passion, trusting that none of it will be wasted or depleted but will, in fact, lead to new life.

This Lent, we are invited to find x. May we seek out the real answer, and not the easy one. To God be all glory forever and ever. Amen.