

## I

Recently I saw a bumper sticker that said, “As long as there are tests, there will always be prayer in schools.”

As long as there are tests, there will always be prayer.

I asked some friends to share with me the story of the most difficult test they ever took, fully expecting them to share something about some complex academic subject. But none of them turned to academics. Instead, they shared about tests like raising children and caring for aging parents. They shared about tests like coming to the end of the money before the end of the month. They shared about navigating rocky waters in their most important relationships.

## II

And their comments brought home for me a simple truth. Life is full of tests, isn't it, both academic and otherwise? All of us, from the very youngest to the very oldest, experience trials in our lives. And as we'll see in our story from Matthew's gospel this morning, the same is true about Jesus.

## III

This winter and spring, we're reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Matthew. And as we've seen already in the early going, Matthew isn't writing a biography. He only gives us two chapters about Jesus' childhood, and he skips over his adolescence entirely.

No, Matthew is writing a gospel – literally good news about Jesus – and so in

the early going, he isn't as concerned with biographical details about Jesus as he is with his theological identity.

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus that traces his ancestry back 42 generations. Right from the start, Matthew wants us, his readers, to understand that Jesus is not some stranger or johnny-come-lately, but rather a man who stands firmly within God's covenant family.

The stories that Matthew includes about Jesus' birth and about the arrival of the magi from the East who declare him the King of the Jews all serve to underscore the theological truth that Jesus is the living fulfillment of prophecy found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Last week, we read Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus, and Matthew tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” The voice from heaven confirms that Jesus is the Son of God.

Matthew spends the first three chapters establishing for us, his readers, Jesus' theological identity. And that leads us into our story for today. We're picking up right where we left off last week, starting at chapter 4, verse 1. So listen now for a Word from God.

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become*

*loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

After his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. Throughout the bible, the number 40

signifies a period of preparation. At the time of the great flood in Genesis, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. In the time of the Exodus, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. And Matthew tells us that after this period of preparation in the wilderness, the tempter came to Jesus, to test him.

We often think of the devil like something out of a cartoon or a Halloween costume shop - you know, horns and tail and pitchfork and red suit. But if you can, I want to invite you to set aside that mental image for a minute and replace it with a building inspector.

As you know, when a building is complete, a building inspector’s job is to come and test the construction of the building - to find any reason why the building shouldn’t be approved for occupancy.

So, in one sense, Jesus’ time of preparation is complete. His baptism, in a sense, is a sign that the construction of his identity is finished. And so now comes the tester to inspect that identity and to do everything in his power to bring it down. The tester is saying, “Are you really who you say you are? Let’s find out what you’re made of.”

In our story, Jesus is put through a series of three tests. The first is a test of appetites. Jesus has been fasting for forty days and forty nights, and he is famished. And so Satan says, “If you are the Son of God, if you really are who you say you are, command these stones to become bread.” In other words, use your power to serve yourself and to satisfy your own appetites.

The next test is one of limits. “If you are who you say you are, throw yourself down from here, for he will command his angels concerning you.” In other words, use your identity in a way that defies the limits set by God and in a way that glorifies only yourself.

And the third test is one of ambition. “Fall down and worship me, and all these kingdoms I will give you

And Jesus says, “Away from me, Satan. For it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

Worship the Lord your God and serve only him. The first commandment that God gave to the Israelites after God had rescued them and provided for them was, “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me.” John Calvin, our ancestor in the faith, said that all sin basically comes down to a form of idolatry - the temptation to worship anything and anyone other than God.

One of the theological truths that the church has proclaimed for two millenia is that Jesus was fully human, just like you and me, except that he was without sin.

He passed every test that the tempter could throw at him. Later on in Matthew’s gospel, during another time of severe testing, Jesus will pray, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.”

In our baptism, we are identified as those who belong to Christ. One of the truths we proclaim is that in our baptism, every

aspect of our identity gets soaked. And to be baptized, that is to be identified with and bear the name of Christ, means that there will most certainly be tests. To be baptized means that there will be temptations. To be baptized means that there will be an inspection to see what you’re made of, to see if you really are who you say that you are.

The tester will come again and again, asking “Are you really who you say you are? Do you really believe what you say you believe?”

#### IV

And my friend, here’s the truth. Sometimes we will see it coming. Sometimes we will recognize the test it as it’s happening. Sometimes we will remember who and whose we are. But not always.

And oftentimes we’re not even aware that we’re being tested and tempted even as it’s happening, for the tempter is sneaky and subtle and crafty ways. Sometimes the tempter comes at us with moral relativism - as long as you’re not hurting anybody, what does it matter. Sometimes the tempter comes at us with an appeal to our ambition - as long as you succeed, then it doesn’t matter how you got there. Sometimes the tempter comes at us with Scripture itself, just as he came at Jesus with a quote from the Psalms. And human history teaches us that human beings have and will do terrible things and quote Scripture as they do it. We know that the system of slavery that existed for more than two centuries here in the United States was upheld as biblically and morally just by some of the finest scholars and theologians of their day. The tempter is a crafty devil to be

sure.

And so often, despite our best intentions, despite all our promises and solemn vows, we fall short. We miss the mark. We do not pass the test. In short, we sin. And when the tempter gets the best of us, we are so often left feeling disheartened and disillusioned and disappointed.

The Apostle Paul, in one of his letters to fellow Christians, spoke of his own sense of this universal human struggle. He said, “The good I want to do, I don’t do, and the evil I don’t want to do, I end up doing. Oh, wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?”

There’s only one answer to that question, because there’s only been one person who passed every test. And Paul answers his own question. He says, “Oh wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ our Lord!

In our baptism, friend, we bear the name of a perfect Savior. In our baptism, we are washed and made clean, once and for all. In our baptism, we are reminded again and again and again that though we are prone to sin, though the wages of sin is death, death does not get the final word. In our baptism we are buried with Christ in a death like his so that we might be raised with him in a resurrection like his.

V

And that’s why every time we gather

for worship, we must confess to God that we have missed the mark, that we have failed the tests that the tempter has thrown at us once again. Someone once asked me, why do we have that prayer of confession at the start of our worship services every week? It’s such a bummer. Are we really telling God anything God doesn’t already know.

And the answer is of course not. But as Scripture reminds us, if we say that we have not sinned, if we say that we have passed every temptation, then we’re deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But Scripture also says that if we confess our sin, God, who is forever merciful and just, will forgive us and cleanse us from our unrighteousness.

For who is in a position to condemn us? Who among us has not sinned? Who is in a position to bring any charge against God’s elect?

It is only Christ. And Christ our Lord was born for us. Christ our Lord was hailed king of the Jews for us. Christ our Lord was baptized for us. Christ our Lord perfectly endured every test and trial and temptation for us. Christ our Lord was betrayed and crucified for us. Christ our Lord died and was raised again and reigns in power forever for us. Christ our Lord prays for us.

Anyone, then, who is in Christ, is a new creation. Anyone, then, who is in Christ, gets a clean slate. Anyone, then, who is in Christ, is forgiven and freed for joyful obedience. The old life has gone, and new life has begun. Thanks be to God. Amen.