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## “The Test”

A sermon by Richard A. Lischer

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**Matthew 4: 1-13**

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Every now and again, a student will stop by my office to tell me something unique about himself or herself, something I don't know. In the course of the conversation he or she will remark, rather casually, "I'm no good at taking tests. It's something you should know about me. I'm no good at taking tests." I wonder why a student would say that? Is she saying, "I really *know* the material, but when the crunch comes, I freeze up or clam up and can't put it together." Or is the student saying something more radical: "Really, none of us should be subjected to tests." Just think of it: a school without exams. Or imagine: a life without critical moments, in which there is no conflict and therefore no possibility of failure or defeat.

Today Jesus is taking his test and those of us who identify with him, which includes the whole Christian church on earth, are watching carefully and hoping he will do well. What kind of test is it? Teachers have an annoying habit of saying, "I do not want to find out what you *don't* know but what you *do* know." (Most students do not believe that for a minute, but that's our story and we're sticking to it.) As far as Satan was concerned, this was a test with one purpose and one purpose only, that of destroying the Student. But notice there is another player in the drama. Read the first line of the text, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." And the Spirit's purpose is never to *destroy* but to *prove*, the way precious metals are refined in a blazing furnace.

The test takes the form of a special kind of conversation called *catechesis*. What is catechesis? I'm glad you asked. We are familiar with the word *catechism*, which is an instructional booklet on religious matters, usually in a Question & Answer form. I'm holding in my hand a copy of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* with its 107 questions and answers, the most famous being Question # 1: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." That question is worth the price of the book!

Catechesis is instruction but of a special nature. It is given orally by an instructor, and those who receive it must show by their response that they have understood what they have received. In the early church new believers were instructed in the faith during Lent, then on the night before Easter plunged naked into a baptismal pool, and finally, wrapped in a baptismal

robe, they recited the Apostles' Creed back into the face the one who had catechized and baptized them, the bishop.

We hear echoes of catechesis throughout the Old Testament and in Judaism. At Passover, as the candles are lit around the Seder table, the youngest member of the household always asks the same question, "Why is this night different from all other nights." The catechesis continues as a voice from the other side of the table responds, "Because on this night the Lord with a mighty arm delivered *us* from slavery."

Both the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent feature a catechesis, but a *perverted* catechesis. Perverted because the wrong person is conducting the test. It is perverted because usually the greater authority asks the questions, and the lesser authority must answer. But in Genesis the Serpent is asking the questions, "Did God really say . . ." And in the Gospel it's the devil who conducts the exam, and the Son of God is being forced to give the answers. Perverted--because the test is not taking place in an air-conditioned classroom but in a sweltering wasteland filled with jagged rocks and wild jackals. Perverted because if Jesus passes the devil's test, he will have failed God's.

And yet it is a true and realistic test. For when you and I are tested, it is rarely in a classroom or an academic setting but in some other crucible: in a hospital or a dormitory or a corporate boardroom or at a party or in the kitchen. It occurs in those nondramatic moments when we are unconsciously deciding what sort of person we will be, whom we will serve, and who it is we will worship. My friend is a recovering alcoholic. When he says, "I have been sober 12 years, 8 months, and 4 days," you get the idea that every day is a test.

The real catechesis always catches you by surprise; you *expect* to think about your faith in church or Sunday School; instead the questions come relentlessly in a *routine physical exam* or a lab report. They come at the end of a long day of work for which you feel chronically unappreciated and unrewarded, when you find yourself asking questions if not about God about your own life. Who am I? Why do I do this? How long can I do it?

Catechesis happens at the oddest and most terrible times. I once heard a pastor say to a dying woman in a nursing home, "Remember, the question for next time is 'How do I know I am a child of God?' And she said, "Got it. See you Thursday." The early reports from Columbine said that just before one of the killers pulled the trigger, he asked one of his victims, "Do you believe in God?" And she he is reputed to have replied, "You know I do."

The *real* questions are always about God. Satan asks the church, "Who are you going to worship?" "Will you worship success above all else?" "Will you worship power by currying favor with those who wield it and disregarding those who do not?" "Will you worship your own silence and let others do your sinning for you? *Answer!*"

The church responds by teaching the facts about God but doesn't always teach the children what to do with the facts. We want to fill their heads with testable information. When I was a young pastor in rural Illinois it was still the custom, as it had been in my youth, for the minister to conduct a public examination of the catechumens a week before they were to be confirmed. The exam took place in church on a Sunday known as Passion Sunday (though it just as easily could have been Humiliation Sunday). The children processed in white robes, like

lambs going to slaughter. The problem with the exam was that it did not explore the children's faith but only tested their memory, which, as it turned out year after year and decade after decade, was not all that good. Their real testing would come later.

Jesus remained in the desert forty long days, just as Israel was lost in the wilderness forty long years. The symbolism is hard to miss. But it's saying more. It is reminding us, who require instant gratification, communicate via text messages, and get our news from 10-second news breaks—that the exam is a very long one. *The test that determines how you will live out your identity as a child of God lasts as long as you walk in the wilderness—and not one day less.*

And the Lord who was out there long ago now accompanies you as long as you walk in the wilderness—and not one day less.

When C.S. Lewis' wife died, he wrote an honest account of his own journey in the wilderness. He called it *A Grief Observed*. In it he cuts right to the God question. He says his wife' suffering and death from cancer did not cause him to quit believing in God. But it did make him wonder what *sort* of God he had.

The answer to Lewis' question can only be found only in the wilderness. When Satan says, "*If* you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread; *if* you are the Son of God, cast yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple," (that is to avoid a life of suffering); *if* you are the Son of God, take the power of gathered armies and parliaments I am offering you"—the force of that little word "*If*" in the Greek language is "and I have no reason to doubt that you are." Thus the question is not "*Are* you the Messiah" but "*Since* you are the Messiah, what sort of Messiah are you going to be?"

*Answer:* He will *not* be a messiah who leads the troops into battle against Islam. He will not be a poster boy for the superiority of one civilization or one nation above another. When he said NO! to Satan in the desert, that door closed forever.

He will *not* be a messiah who promises to make you rich, successful or confident in your social life. He will feed the hungry but not the full.

He will *not* be a messiah who soars above our suffering and look down upon it through the clouds. He will not avoid the crucible, but join us in it.

Because of Jesus our whole conceptual framework named "God" changes. He is no longer the God *out there*, but the God *in here*. In confirmation class I suppose we still teach the children that God is transcendent. "Transcendent" comes with its own hand motion. It's one of those words you can't say without indicating 'away out *there*'. But thanks to Jesus, our God is transcendentally *near*. It's a transcendence that comes with ashes on the forehead and a cross on the breast. Our Lord is hidden alright, but not hidden not in the clouds but in the flesh of those who suffer.

But the question remains. What if you really *aren't* any good at taking tests? Well, as it turns out, none of us is, not one. We always get it wrong. We worship the wrong kinds of power, demand the wrong kind of results, and serve all the wrong gods. We do falter.

But there is one who always gets it right. When the teacher calls on Jesus he stands up straight and answers in a clear voice for all the tongue-tied and muddle-headed of the world. And he never messes up.

*Satan* says, "The class is waiting, Jesus. What's the answer?"

*Jesus* replies, "Oh, that's an easy one: 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shalt thou serve.'"

And *God* says, "Well done, son. You go to the head of the class."