

“Shaped by testing: Becoming authentically human.”

Introduction: The theme for this Lent is Becoming Authentically Human: Called and Shaped by Jesus. Dick wrote a great article about this in the Oak Leaves, but just as a refresher, what does “authentically human” mean? Most times when we talk about “being human” we talk about it like our humanness is what causes us to make mistakes. After all, we’re only human, right? But, what if being human wasn’t such a bad thing? In fact, what if being human is what we’re supposed to be? Maybe how we look at “being human” is wrong. I think that we should turn this phrase on its head. In Genesis 1:26, God creates mankind.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

We were made in the image of God. Our whole beings and selves are like God. In the print of the section of the Sistine Chapel called *The Creation of Adam* shown in front of me, Michelangelo portrays the hand of God reaching out to the hand of man. You can see how God’s finger is extending to man’s, making God the giver and man the recipient. And what else would man be receiving but the gift of God’s image. Then in verse 31 it says:

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

Not only are we made in the image of God, but God saw us and called us “very good.” God saw everything else in the whole world as “good,” but us, he saw as “very good.” Now, how could we possibly use something that is made in the image of God and called “very good” as an excuse for mistakes? It is not our humanity that separates us from God, it is our sin. So, in our journeys to follow after Christ and return to God, we are not trying to escape our humanity. Instead, we are trying to become the humans we were meant to be before sin entered the world. We are becoming authentic humans, not the dim shadow of people that we are today.

In the drama today, we saw two stories which have absolutely everything to do with humanity. We saw Adam, the first man, the father of all men and women on earth, forever and ever. We saw the Son of God come down as a man and take a walk in the desert. Two stories of two humans, though I recognize that Jesus is also God, going through something that is very common for people: testing. In our Scripture today we read two stories of testing: the testing of Adam and Eve in the garden and the testing of Jesus in the desert. Now, what does testing have to do with becoming authentically human? Many of you might suggest, and in fact, my life would attest, that testing is usually not a time where we become better people. In fact, testing is the time that we most often use the phrase “I’m only human.” And yet, I believe that the test that Adam faced and the test that Jesus faced speak an awful lot to what it means to be authentically human. And notice I use the word “test” rather than “temptation.” “Temptation” suggests that we are being led into something bad or evil; tests, while difficult are for the purpose of becoming better. And I think that the word “test” applies here much better.

So we see these two tests, and these are really tests of who is in control. The biggest struggle that we have in life against God is the struggle of control. Do we let God control, or do we want control? This is seen in Christ's temptations in the desert and before His crucifixion: Satan tempted him with control over the situation rather than allowing God's will to control. Jesus could've used His power as God's son to make all people believe and bow down to Him. He would not have had to die; he would not have had to suffer humiliation and persecution. He could have displayed himself in glory like a warrior so that all people would be forced to bow down to Him. Instead, he chose to allow God's control to reign, the path of peace and humility. In the Fall, Satan tempted Eve and Adam with control over their own futures. They could know what God knew. They could be like God. After all, why shouldn't they be like God? And so they decided to take control and reject what God had for them. When we are tested over the issue of control, we are given the choice to submit ourselves to God or to exert our own control. The fact is that God's control is so much better and richer and consequence free than man's control. If we submit to God's control, we submit ourselves to a life that, while it may not always pay off in a sense that the world will recognize, will prove best in the eternal perspective.

Part of becoming "authentically human" is letting God be in control of our lives. When we look at the Bible and at history, when we try to take control, we fail. And everyone faces points in their lives when they have to choose whether or not to let God be in control. How does testing help us to become authentically human?

Big Idea: Testing reveals who we are and what we want. Are we disciples who give God control of our lives, or are we selfish and prideful, choosing to take control of our situations?

In the Matthew passage read today, the gospel writer focuses on the quick coming nature of the tests following Christ's baptism. Immediately after God proclaims that Jesus is His son and the Holy Spirit comes down on Him in the form of a dove, Jesus **is led**, emphasis on the fact that He is led, to the desert to a face-off with Satan over control. This proves one central truth to life: nearly all mountain top experiences are followed by valleys. That is partly what Dick talked about last week. Peter tempted Jesus on top of the mountain to remain there rather than to descend and face His destiny. The reality in coming down from the mountain for Jesus was that he was going to die and for Peter was that he was going to deny Christ three times. Their mountaintop was followed by a valley.

Jesus was led in the desert to be tested. The desert was a vast expanse of crumbling rock and yellow sand with hills, bumps, crests and structures moving in every which direction so as to look like a twisted hedge maze. There were no trees for shelter from the sun. Everything around was dry and desolate. The sun beat down upon the cracked ground and heat rose up so hot that you could see the waves. Jesus came here to be alone, and there was no better place for that. This was Jesus' proving ground. This was where he was led to be tested by Satan and to reveal his God-centered nature.

I think we often take for granted the fact that Jesus came to earth to live among us and to live like us. He experienced testing, trials, and temptation in the same way that we do. He lived in the lonely and the desolate areas. The *Lectionary Story Bible* has a cool way of describing Jesus' first encounter with this testing in the desert.

“How can I show people how to live in God’s way?” Jesus wondered. Jesus went out into the desert. He found a lonely place where he could think for a long time. Jesus didn’t eat any food and drank just a little water. Jesus felt that being very hungry and thirsty might help him hear God. But for a while, Jesus didn’t seem to be hearing God at all. Jesus began to hear an evil voice inside him. The voice talked about the wrong way to be the Messiah.”

Think about a test you have faced in your life. What was your proving ground? Sometimes, we may find ourselves in a desolate desert, searching for God and hearing nothing but the dark whisper of doubt, confusion and evil.

Sometimes, though, like Eve and Adam we may find ourselves in a lush garden, presented with something tantalizing, something sweet, something exotic.

Whatever our testing ground is, we are presented with a choice. We get to choose the outcome of the situation.

Big Idea: Testing reveals who we are and what we want. Are we disciples who give God control of our lives, or are we selfish and prideful, choosing to take control of our situations?

Jesus’ testing in the desert shows us **two** unfortunate realities of life.

First, testing is inevitable. It happens to everyone, including the Son of God. In **Matthew 6:13**, in what we would refer to as the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus commands his followers to pray that they are not led into temptation. But in Matthew 18:7, Jesus recognizes that some will experience situations that cause them to stumble (and by some I mean all).

Matthew 18:7

⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!”

Jesus says look, tests are going to come your way. I’m sorry, but they will. Oh and also, they are going to cause you to stumble; it’s inevitable. Thanks Jesus, that’s not very comforting. It reminds me of the scene from *Deep Impact* where the asteroid strikes the ocean and the absolutely giant wave is headed for the beach. The mother and her daughter stand on the beach, staring into it, knowing that they are going to die and there is nothing that they can do about it. That’s what life and struggle is like. We can shut our eyes and run away, but no matter what we do, we are going to get hit with it anyways. In some ways it is kind of depressing.

But, in 1 Corinthians, Paul offers hope. Though we are going to be tempted and tested, it will not be greater than what we are able to handle.

1 Corinthians 10:12-13

¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

God is our rock in times of testing. He is our way out. There have been many times in my life when I have tried my hardest to take control and deal with difficult situations on my own, and I have failed miserably. Until I was willing to let God in on them, I was not getting anywhere.

Secondly, testing is not always a bad thing, even though it may feel like it during the test.

In James 1:2-4, the author discusses how our trials can actually benefit our spiritual journeys.

James 1:2-4

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, ³ whenever you face trials of many kinds, ⁴ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Testing also reveals our inner character, the "me" inside of me.

In the book of Job, we see that God allows the protagonist to be tested which revealed his inner character as righteous. What do we see in the character of Jesus? We see the Son of God as man revealing His total devotion to the will and control of God. Up until this point in Matthew, we are not shown much of who Jesus is and what He is all about. But, in this event, Jesus' nature is revealed through his refusal to take control and exert his own power and instead relying on God's plan and working.

Notice that after Jesus turns down each of the temptations for control, God comes in and takes care of Him.

And so we too are tested. **Big Idea:** And testing reveals who we are and what we want. Are we disciples who give God control of our lives, or are we world followers who choose to take control of our situations?

What is the reality of a life chasing after God? IF we are called to be Christ followers, if we are tested, and if we give our lives over to God, what does that mean for us?

Well, it means that we are becoming authentically human. We are becoming who we were always meant to be, before sin entered into the picture. We are giving control of life over to God, and he is making us clean and new.

In Romans 5:18, Paul blends together the two tests that we heard about today, Adam's test and Jesus' test, and shows us the difference between humanity after the fall, humanity who is consumed by sin and evil, and humanity who has given control over to God, who is becoming authentically human.

Romans 5:18

“Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”

JUSTIFICATION AND LIFE. This is who we were meant to be, this is what we are supposed to have, and this is what we become when we give our control over to God.

And when we do allow God to lead, He tells us that we are his beloved sons and daughters.

Conclusion:

This is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which is a season of sacrifice in order to prepare our hearts for the coming of Easter. During this time, we give up and take on something in order to spiritually align ourselves with Christ. For those of you that were here on Wednesday for “A Time for Prayer”, we were given the symbol of the cross in ashes on our foreheads to symbolize our desires to rid our lives of those things which separate us from God. Lent corresponds with the 40 days that Christ spent in the desert being tempted by Satan. During this time of sacrifice, we ourselves are tested. Our characters are tried as we attempt to give control of some part of our lives over to God.

One of my perennial struggles is with control. I want to be in control. I don't trust other people to do things right, so I would rather do it myself. That's why one of the things that I absolutely hate to do is a trust fall. I hate the trust fall. This summer, in order to grow closer as a group, the mission Indy interns went through a low ropes course at a retreat that we went to. One of the first parts of this course was the trust fall. The one that we used was a platform attached to a tree that was about my eye level. Unfortunately, I waited too long to volunteer to do it and I ended up being the last person. All I could think about while climbing up onto the platform was about how the last time I had done one of these I had gotten dropped. I did it though, and I hated every second of it. But I crossed my arms and leaned back, basically ready to die. So I didn't really learn how to trust; I basically took control that I was going to get hurt.

Trust and control are so difficult. But we have to trust God. And yet, we live in a constant tension between a God that desires control and a world that demands it.

Henri Nouwen, in his Lenten devotional for today, recognizes and discusses those two opposing voices: God and the world.

“Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: “You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.” It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: “You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless, you are despicable, you are nobody-unless **you** can demonstrate the opposite.” (my emphasis; the test is that we can redeem ourselves in the eyes of the world by grasping for power or popularity or whatever or we can rely on God) Nouwen continues...These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap. It's the trap of self-rejection...When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions.” And I would add, as attractive solutions to God. And so we are given a choice, a

test. And in this test, we prove what kind of person we are. Do we choose God, and choose authentic humanity? Or do we remain as we are?