

This is a test?

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Texts: Psalm 66:8-12, 16-20; James 1:2-4, 12; I Corinthians 10:12-13; I Peter 4:12, 13;
Hebrews 2:18

Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan at the very beginning of his ministry. Three gospels tell us that he was immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested for forty days and forty nights.

Did it ever occur to you to ask, “Why did Jesus face a test at the very beginning of his ministry?” Think about it! You start a challenging a new job, something you’ve never done before, and on your first day someone says, “OK, it’s test time!” What’s your reaction? “Hey, let me get used to this for a while, let me settle in and learn something before you throw a test at me!!!” That would be my reaction!

On the other hand, maybe it makes sense to have a test at the beginning, to see whether Jesus was ready for service. Luke’s account says that Jesus went into the test filled with the Holy Spirit, and after the test he went out preaching filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. He was stronger after the test...it empowered him to enter into his ministry. The test solidified his identity as God’s son.

Testing makes us stronger. Think about your muscles, your muscles need testing to grow strong. I know some of you have run marathons, and you trained your muscles to do that. Can you run 5K? Can you run 10K? You test your muscles more week by week. You also test your mind. Do you have the mental stamina to keep running, keep pushing one leg after the other even when your lungs are bursting and your legs are aching? You test your muscles and your mind over and over again, so that you can face the ultimate test of a marathon.

For those of you who have cared for children, you know how testing brings about endurance. When a baby is hungry they cry and cry until they are fed. Even when children are toddlers or school age, when they are hungry, they get cranky, they get grumpy, they act out. As adults we often excuse their behaviour. We look at each other and say, “Oh, they are just so hungry!” But gradually, as they get older, that is not an excuse anymore for bad behaviour. If a teenager starts flipping out just before dinner, you may know they are very hungry, but as an adult you are more likely to say, “Deal with it.” Hunger is a test; can you be kind and reasonable when your stomach is hurting and you have a headache? Maturity, strength of character, involves being able to have consistent good behaviour even under pressure. And you get that consistency by being tested.

I think about Jesus. The supreme test he faced was being arrested and humiliated and tortured on the cross. Why didn’t he just start with that? Why not get baptized, get arrested and killed, and then have his public ministry, his teaching time after he had risen from the dead?

I think Jesus, being human, needed years to prepare for the test he would face on the cross. What kind of moral muscles did it take for him to not respond with anger when Judas came with the soldiers? To call this traitor, "Friend"? What did it take for Jesus not to fly into a rage when they shackled him, when they mocked him? What kind of muscle did it show to allow himself to be crucified, to not call out for help, to not change his mind, to not perform a miracle to save himself? Jesus was a human being like us. In order to accomplish something big, I think he had to go through many small tests to train for that important task. Over and over in his ministry he was tested, by situations, by people, even by his own disciples.

The Psalm we read today talks about God testing us, trying us as silver is tried. Silver would be melted in a refiner's fire, a very hot fire, and the different types of metal would separate. It's a strong image, an image of testing.

This week I've been thinking about someone who faced a great deal of testing. His name was Jackie Robinson. He was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. For decades, and up until the 1940's there was a Negro baseball league for black players and black fans, and there was a white baseball league, the Major League, that black men were not allowed to play in.

In the mid-1940's the president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, decided that it was time for Negro players to join the major leagues, which segregation should end. He sent scouts out looking for the person to do this, a person to begin an experiment to see whether the Major League could handle this. They eventually settled on Jackie Robinson.

Branch Rickey had a long talk with Jackie, explaining how hard this was going to be, how he was going to get abuse from his own teammates, from the opposition, from fans; he was going to face abuse from so many people. What was very important, was that he not fight back. Branch Rickey knew that Robinson would be blamed for any fight that happened.

Jackie Robinson listened to Branch and finally said, "Are you looking for someone who is afraid to fight back?" Branch told him, "It's just the opposite, I'm looking for someone with guts enough not to fight back." Branch needed someone who could focus on the game and just be a great player. Branch Rickey was a Methodist, and so was Jackie. One of Jackie's mentors had been a minister, who helped him at key points in life. Branch asked Jackie whether he had the courage to "turn the other cheek" whenever he was abused. Jackie said he was ready to do this. He had the goal of playing Major League baseball, and opening this up for all black players.

That's how Jackie ended up as player #42 with the Brooklyn Dodgers. His team-mates were not supportive. Some of them got a petition together to say that they wouldn't play with Jackie. Branch told them that if they wanted to transfer out of his team, he would arrange that, but Jackie was staying.

While integration of different peoples was common in the north, in the south there were laws, called Jim Crow laws, which made it illegal for black people and white people to be together. They had to eat in different restaurants, use different toilets, swim on different beaches, go to different schools. If they rode on the same bus, the black people had to sit at the back, away from the white people. And so when they travelled to the South to play, Jackie wasn't allowed to stay in the same hotels as the white players, restaurants wouldn't serve him. Black fans who came to watch the Major League games had their own "blacks only" entrance, and segregated bleachers.

But abuse did not just come from the South, even in the North there was racism. Everywhere fans booed Jackie when he appeared on the field. They heckled him. They yelled racist things at him, continually, all the time. Jackie received death threats. People wrote him saying they would kill him, they would kill his wife, they would kidnap his son. The threats were taken seriously by the FBI who had to keep an eye out for the safety of Jackie and his family.

And Jackie suffered abuse on the field too. In the first season, Jackie had the major league record for number of times that he was hit by a pitcher with the ball...pitchers hit him seven times with the ball that season (and players did not wear batting helmets in those days!)

Over and over Jackie was tested...would he freak out? Would he yell and make a huge scene? Would he scream back obscenities? Would he physically attack someone who was harassing him and his family? Week after week, month after month, he remembered his promise to Branch Rickie to turn the other cheek, to just concentrate on playing baseball.

And he could play baseball. He could play baseball fabulously. He had become a valuable member of the team, getting hits, home runs, and lots and lots of stolen bases.

At one game against the Phillies, the Philadelphia team and its general manager were yelling racial slurs at Jackie, saying horrible things about his wife and trying to provoke him. It was so appalling, that his teammates came to his defence, yelling back at the Phillies to be quiet. Jackie was their teammate; he could not stand up for himself, and they couldn't just stand by as he was abused right in front of them. Even though the team wasn't that keen on accepting Jackie, they defended him.

At one game in Cincinnati during the warm-up the fans were heckling and booing Jackie incessantly. The best batter on Jackie's team, Peewee Reese, finally had enough, and he went over to Jackie to talk to him, and he put his arm around Jackie's shoulder, and just stood there talking to him. This act of solidarity between the two players silenced the crowd.

Jackie Robinson's ability to turn the other cheek was very significant. And it wasn't just him. Black fans turned out in huge numbers to watch Major League games. Clergy and other community leaders counselled fans not to react to the racial taunts, not to fight. Opponents of including black players, said that it would never work. They said that black and white fans could not be in the same stadiums because there would be riots. The fact that Jackie played and there were no major incidents, broke the colour barrier for other players and soon the Negro league was no longer needed, because the way was open for white and black to play together, and spectators to watch baseball together too.

How could Jackie stand all that abuse? It came from moral character. Jackie knew who he was, he had worth and dignity before God, and he knew that nothing anyone could say to him could change that. He did get angry, he found it very hard not to defend himself and fight back; but he looked at the goal of integration, and he knew it was best accomplished by turning the other cheek. This was a test. Jackie Robinson passed that test, and opened the way for all the other black players after him.

Jackie is always remembered on April 15, Jackie Robinson Day in Major League Baseball, the day he first appeared with the Dodgers. All players in the Major League wear the number 42, to remember Jackie's courage and legacy. The number 42 is retired from all teams in baseball, in honour of Jackie's accomplishment.

Testing. Tested like silver is tested; a fiery ordeal. Testing produces endurance. The verses we read today about testing make sense when you look at the story of Jesus, and this more contemporary story of Jackie Robinson. Does that mean then that we should embrace all suffering as a test because it will make us stronger? If we want to be really holy, should we seek out suffering?

There are streams in Christianity that read the same verses we read today, and ran with them. They thought, testing is good, therefore the more tests I put myself through, the stronger I will get. They took it to extremes; in some monastic traditions monks wore extremely uncomfortable itchy clothes, or lived in the desert without food for long periods of time or even whipped themselves till their backs were bloody. The goal was to see whether you could still be holy even when your body was stressed or in pain. They believed that putting yourself through rigorous tests was a good thing.

Most people in our century would say that is too extreme, and not a faithful reading of the biblical text. That happened long ago. But there are other ways these verses are still being used that aren't helpful.

I think of a student I met in one of my university classes. As I got to know her she confided that she had just left her husband. She was also estranged from her family and her church. Her husband had beaten her up, and so she went back to her parent's home. They asked her what she had done to provoke him so badly. They told her she needed to go back and work things out. She endured beating after beating. Finally, she went to her pastor, and he prayed with her, and told her that she had taken vows for better or worse. If God wanted to change her husband's heart, he would, but in the meantime, this was a test that she would just have to endure. After enduring more beatings, she finally had enough, and broke with her husband, her family and her church in order to find safety.

Or I remember someone I knew when my kids were little. Her son was in our nursery school, and he had diabetes, but he also had some other behaviour issues where he would refuse to eat, even when he needed to eat to stay healthy. She spent hours trying to get food into him so that he could stay healthy. I remember seeing her in the morning at nursery school; she looked absolutely worn out, and she'd often been crying. She was part of an evangelical church, and she confided to me, "If one more person tells me that God will give me the strength to endure my trials, I'm going to scream." What she needed was people to help her, in a very difficult time. And I think she needed people who would just listen, who would "weep with those who weep", rather than giving her a bible verse and walking away.

Sometimes Christians have been very quick to tell people that something is a test; it's a way of abandoning them to their suffering. They are in trouble and we don't want to help, and we don't know how to help, or we can't help them, and so we just give them a simple answer; "It's a test, you have to deal with it. Here's a bible verse that proves that." That is not good news.

The verses we read today about testing and suffering must be considered in the light of the rest of the Bible. If all God wants us to do is be tested and suffer, then God would have left the Hebrew people in Egypt forever. God would have sent Moses to them saying, "Don't worry, dear friends, being slaves is a test, you are becoming better people through your slavery." But God desired freedom for Israel, Moses went to Pharaoh to say God's words, "Let my people go!"

If God wanted us to suffer endlessly, Jesus would have told the people with leprosy, "Your leprosy is a test, making you a better person. Go in peace to strengthen your character." Jesus' ministry was about proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). We are not called to suffer endlessly, for all time, in order to improve our character. God does deliver us from suffering, and it's right and appropriate to ask for deliverance. Even Jesus avoided some types of suffering. There was a crowd that wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff; he didn't say, "Oh, being thrown off a cliff and breaking all my limbs is going to be a good test and make me a stronger person." No, he walked away from the cliff edge and through the crowd (Luke 4:28-30).

Here in our congregation, I know many people suffer for many reasons. Maybe you have a great job, but there is one person there who is making your life terribly difficult. The job would be perfect except for this one troublemaker. Or maybe it's someone in your family. Your family is great except for this one person who no one can get along with. Or maybe it's severe financial trials or unemployment or grief or chronic pain or mental or physical illness. We wake up in the morning and our stomach sinks as we remember what we face this day. We don't know how we can get through it. Existence itself seems like a test.

We pray for deliverance, and sometimes it comes, but other times it doesn't. It's a mystery, it's beyond our knowledge why some people are delivered and some people are not. We read these verses about testing, and I personally have sometimes found these verses a bit chilling. We worry that something is a test, and that it's not ever going to be taken away from us. Can God be that cruel, to test us so cruelly?

I'm not of the opinion that God manufactures and sends out tests. I don't think God is standing in heaven with a bunch of cancer diagnoses ready to hand out to people who need to be tested. I don't believe God sends bad things. But things happen on earth, whether because things just happen, or because sometimes people do bad things to each other. I think the good news is that no matter what happens to us, God is with us. In all things, even really bad things, God works for good (Romans 8:28). God is powerful enough that even very bad things can be used by God to help us.

And so death on a cross, can be used by God to bring about a good thing, salvation. The racist taunts and death threats that Jackie Robinson endured, eventually resulted in compassion from team mates, and a breakdown of racial divides. When you are enduring suffering because you have a goal or a purpose, it can help. Or it can help if you enter into the suffering with open eyes, willingly. But sometimes our suffering is thrust upon us, or it's entirely private, it's not for some great cause like saving humanity or breaking the colour barrier. How does my physical pain accomplish anything in the world? What purpose could it serve? I don't have an answer to those questions.

It seems to me that in our most senior years, we can face multiple trials. We face grief as friends or partners die, at the same time that we are facing disability. Or we face financial problems right when we are dealing with physical pain. When I have seen people handling these difficulties with grace and kindness, it has inspired me deeply. I think that it has taken them a lifetime of testing, a lifetime of prayer and habitual kindness, to hold their characters steady in those situations. And I've also seen very young people facing tests that I have never faced, facing them with amazing grace.

I pray regularly for people who are suffering, I pray for deliverance. I think first and foremost our job as the church is to pray for deliverance, and work to help people who are being tested. Deliverance can come through us. "God in heaven, let this cup of suffering pass from them."

This week, as we wait for deliverance, as we work for deliverance, I wonder if we can look for the power of God working in a difficult situation. As you wait for deliverance, can you draw on the strength of God to face the painful or difficult situation you are in, to live with it? Can you pray for God to give you moral muscles?

I know it's hard to do that. Testing is best understood with hindsight. When I look back at some very hard times I've gone through with grief, with sickness in our family, I can say honestly that they made me a stronger person, a more compassionate person. And yet I still find that when bad things happen to me, my first reaction is always to complain or to say, "Why me?" or wonder angrily why life is so hard. Especially when you compare yourself to other people who are not facing the problems you are facing. But where does resentment get me? Where does complaining get me? Where does thinking "poor me!" get me?

These verses help us when we are stuck, when the suffering won't go away. These verses about testing are a challenge for us to focus on God. God is doing something in my life, God can use anything, any hardship, to help us. These verses are an encouragement to remember that we are not alone. Jesus also suffered, and Jesus walks with us. With God's help we can be mature, consistent and strong, lacking in nothing, as we face trials and tests of every kind.

Let's pray:

Lord you know the suffering that we face. We cry for help, we cry for deliverance. As we wait for your mercy, give us eyes to see your presence in our hardships. Open our eyes to see the way these tests can help us be better, stronger, more faithful followers of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
**For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.** ~Psalm 66:8-10

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind,
consider it nothing but joy,
**because you know that the testing of your faith
produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect,
so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.** ~James 1:2-4

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.
No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.
God is faithful,
and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
**but with the testing he will also provide the way out
so that you may be able to endure it.** ~I Corinthians 10:12-13

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation.
**Such a one has stood the test
and will receive the crown of life
that the Lord has promised to those who love him.** ~James 1:12

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal
that is taking place among you to test you,
as though something strange were happening to you.
**But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings,
so that you may also be glad and shout for joy
when his glory is revealed.** ~I Peter 4:12, 13

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered,
he is able to help those who are being tested. ~Hebrews 2:18

I am struck by the verses from I Peter 4: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." I feel like the writer of I Peter is reading our minds here, because I think we are all surprised when things become hard. I am always surprised. We want things to go our way. We pray for deliverance, and we expect it. But it doesn't always come.