

Tested or Tempted? James 2:12-18 Lent 1B 2-18-18

A song written several years ago by Helen Lemmel has a familiar refrain that goes like this: *Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.* Whether the things of earth are testing our faith or tempting us to sin, Jesus gives strength to endure and overcome whatever we face.

James' readers were tested by the Roman persecution. The temptation was to end it by renouncing Christ. Today, many throughout the world face the same tests and temptations. If it is not overt threats, it is still tempting to hide our faith in silence to avoid social ridicule and exclusion.

In the language of the Bible, the word for test and tempt are the same. In life they are related: to endure a test means we resist the temptation not to. God tests us build our faith. If we escape rather than endure, our faith is stronger. It's like lifting heavy weights. It makes you strain and feel weak, but afterward, the muscle recovers and are stronger than before. So it is with faith that is tested.

God tests not only to build faith, as with Abraham and Isaac, but also to correct and humble us. He does that by allowing persecution, as with the disobedient Israelites. Or by permitting an infirmity, such as St. Paul had. It taught him to be humble and to rely on God's power instead of his own. Hebrews 12 compares some hardships to the discipline of an earthly father who loves his son enough to correct him. It seems at the time harsh, but results in the fruit of righteousness.

Trials also give us an opportunity to witness to the world that our God is worth suffering for and entrusting our lives to. Peter says that persecution should not surprise us. Jesus promised it. All the apostles experienced it, even to death. Jesus calls it a blessing in which we can rejoice. It means we join good company of the faithful before us. The reward for faithful endurance is the crown of life. Our society values earthly happiness and success. God's only will for us is greater faith and holiness. He will allow whatever that takes to come into our life.

Temptations different from tests in their source and goal. They don't come from God. They set out to

cripple our faith, leading us to sin separates us from God and each other. God tested Adam and Eve with the prohibition not to eat fruit of a certain tree. Satan tempted them to eat it. Though they were still sinless, they took the bait and of their own free will brought sin into their own lives and into ours. A sign of that sinful nature was the shame that cause them to blame God for their sin.

We never had a completely free will as they did, but that does not let us blame others for our sinful desires. James says temptation hooks the sinful desires already in us, which when conceived gives birth to sin and sin to death. Temptations are themselves not sin, but willingly entertaining them is. Martin Luther compared temptation to birds flying overhead. You can't prevent them from flying over, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

If we willfully and without repentance yield to them regularly, we endanger our soul. We have forsaken the faith. However, some sins are those of weakness, unique in degree and kind to each of us. Against them, we struggle daily with God's help. Should we fail in

that fight we call upon the grace of God in Christ to forgive and continue the struggle.

Whether it is a test or a temptation we look to Jesus. He understands, for he was sorely tempted; like Abraham not to give the sacrifice God required; and like Adam, to take the bait of Satan in the wilderness. At no time did he sin, and thus is able to help us.

Instead of blaming God, we call on Him for strength and mercy for all He gives is good and perfect. Though trials and temptations come and go, He does not change. He does not change his mind about sin, or about his promise that all who call upon him in time of trouble he will not cast out. Instead, he will give a way out. He strengthens us through the Sacrament of his real presence and in the counsel of His word. He hears us when we follow his command given in the in the garden of Gethsemane: "*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"

So Helen Lemmel had it right: If you know the refrain, sing with me. Amen.