**Tested by God**

Based on [Genesis 22:1-18](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Ge22.1-18) and [Mark 1:9-15](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mk1.9-15)

Preached on February 22, 2015

Lent 1

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

The Epiphany season is over. Jesus is revealed to be the Christ and Son of God through many signs and proof. Epiphany was about Jesus showing the Glory of God in his works manifesting them forth in his person. But now we are firmly in the season of Lent, a season of penitence and humility, because there is a special focus on the humiliation of Jesus. Epiphany focuses on Jesus’ Glory and power; Lent on his humility and suffering as he takes up his cross for us.

Last week, the transfiguration was when Jesus visibly turned into God. Not as though he wasn't God before, but for the first time in his earthly ministry he actually *looked like it*. Why didn't he look like it all the time? Because he was in his state of humiliation. The first half of the Apostle's Creed is his humiliation, which means he didn't fully use his divine "god" powers to save himself or avoid his cross. Though he was God, he didn't cheat and use his God powers to bend the world to his will. As Philippians says, “**He did not count equality with God a thing to be seized; Instead he made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant**” (2:6-7).

The only thing that Jesus' divinity added to his atonement for us, was that he was born without sin, and his life and blood were a precious enough ransom to pay for the sins of the world. Otherwise, he was in every way like you and me, for he was truly and fully man; for he did not come in power, but humility and weakness. In other words, friends, in his overcoming of sin in the world, Jesus had to be tested in humiliation. He was the Holy One of God, but he had to prove it as a man. And so he was tested.

And friends, Jesus didn't cheat the test. He didn't “**use his God power”** to destroy his enemies Satan and sin or to overcome obstacles, he didn’t overcome death and the devil thru using his own power or force that he has at his disposal but we do not. He did it all as a man, and as a man in humility and weakness. He was conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died, and buried in weakness, passively enduring the assaults of the world and the devil, all the while preaching the Gospel, as our Gospel notes today, “**”The time is fulfilled, repent and believe in the gospel”** (Mark 1:15).

Jesus was God, but he did it all as a man, as Adam; and he had to, for he came to reverse Adam’s curse. An illustration: Say a man has the superability to count cards, you know remember what’s been played in a cardgame and by the process of elimination, has an overwhelming advantage over anyone else at the blackjack table. So goes to Vegas and starts beating the odds and winning big cash. What does the casino end up doing? They throw him out. He's thrown out, because counting cards is cheating. Rain Man’s gotta play the same game of chance as everyone else, at their level, or else he won’t be allowed at the table. And so, back to our topic. When Jeses was sent into the world, he had to overcome the world in it's own setting, and on its own terms. And so, though Jesus being God, could count cards in Vegas...he didn't. He played just like everyone else and still won every hand and ended up buying out the casino.

Jesus was tested, and all of today’s scripture reading for the season of Lent have to do with testing. And Testing has been around a lot longer than our educational system. God invented testing, for God tests men. Could you imagine an educational system where the teacher simply asks the students if they know what they were taught, and they say “yes,” and so they hand out a diploma? That would be a disaster. If they truly do know the materials, then they ought to be able to pass the test.

So too, God asks you if you love him and of course you say what?...”**Yes I love you**.” And then your child dies unexpectedly, and God of course, could have prevented it all. Now, He asks again, “Do you love me?” You say, “**No you took my child away, that was so cruel and unnecessary, a god that deserves to be called "God" would never do such a thing. I don’t love you anymore**.” God responds, “Then you never loved me in the first place; for love, real love, is unconditional.

The OT lesson today is about Abraham being tested by God. God said to Abraham, “Take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” In other words, kill your son as a sacrifice to me. So to Abraham, Isaac--his only son whom he loves--is as good as dead, for to the one who has faith, to hear God is to obey...they are the same thing. And so on the third day begins a long account of the events that transpired up to the crucial moment. Abraham laid the wood for the altar on the back of Isaac to carry up the mountain; like the turkey carrying the axe to the chopping block. Isaac sees the wood and the fire, but he asks his Father, where’s the lamb for the sacrifice? Abraham responds with some of the greatest words of faith, saying “**My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering**” (22:8). Abraham here recognizes that God gave him his beloved son to begin with, and that if he takes him away, Abraham he has no complaint.

Abraham takes the knife, when the angel of the Lord says, “Do not lay your hand on the boy, for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not spare your beloved son from me. So God tested Abraham, and Abraham passed the test, and he was proved faithful. And of course you know there was one Father who also did not spare his only Son, whose son actually had to carry wood on his back up a mountain, and that very wood would be used to kill him, and that son is Jesus Christ, my Saviour and yours. He carried his own means of execution up the mountain and when he got there, he didn't find a ram in the thicket...he was the absolute sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He was substituted on the cross for you and for me...hanging there on the cross and receiving the punishment that we deserve so that when we stand before God on the day of Judgment in faith in Jesus Christ, Jesus will be our substitute there also. And when God looks at us, He can say "With you I am well pleased, enter into the glory of your master."

Friends we are constantly tested by God. He has the right to do it; for if we don't have faith or if we don't fear him or love him; or if we do have faith, fear and love him we will pass the test correct? God tests us quite a bit. In marriage for instance, promises that the two shall become one flesh, and that what God has joined let no man put asunder. He promises to join you. And yet we are constantly tempted to not trust in His Word of Promise, but in what's going on in our marriages instead, and how we feel about it, instead of turning to God who promises to bear our burdens in marriage and keep us to the end. In all friendships and all relationships we are tested by God, to see if we abandon them, or whether we keep going in the midst of suffering unto the end when God will deliver us.

We at the church are tested by God too. In every church there are disagreements. In every church there are things that people dispute about. We've had our disagreements here within Immanuel Lutheran Church. And God gives all churches encouragement in this too. That it's not a sign of his abandonment or His judgment. Disagreement and hardship and conflict, which happens in every church, is not a sign of failure, it is actually God testing us. As St. Paul writes to the Church in Corinth, “**When you come together as a church as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized**” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19). Bad news is that until Jesus comes again there are going to be disagreements and factions within his One Holy Christian and Apostolic Church. We're not going to have heaven on earth before Jesus comes. But we also have the comfort of knowing that this is God's Will, that he tests his church through these things so that those who are genuine might be proved. Disagreements in the church are an opportunity to test our genuineness, God says so in his word. We shouldn’t run from them, but we should regard them for what they are, opportunities to prove our faith in what God has said. That testing is called reconciliation; it can be a grueling process, but God is at work in it, no doubt.

After all we all say we love the church when things seem to be going well, or when we approve of what's going on, but when things get challenging, hearts are revealed. You cannot love your church family only when things are going well, you can't. God sends difficulty and hardship to test our faith, and one who leaves in the midst of hardship, it only proves that the love was false to begin with, or else that the love eventually became focused on something other than the saints gathering around their Savior to worship him and receive his grace and blessing. But disagreements in the church are a kind of forced Lent. God is giving us an opportunity to reflect on our words and actions to one another and to Him, and put our own personal views and preferences aside to better refine our faith in what He's said, that we can be sure our faith is based on God's word, and has the foundation of Christ alone.

God’s church is constantly tested by God; it’s constantly tempted by Satan. And that makes sense because we are the body of Christ, and Satan exploits every opportunity to tempt Him. Our gospel lesson focuses on Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan for forty days and nights. It was God the Holy Spirit who drove him out there to be tested, and the test was to resist what Satan would offer him, to avoid suffering. You see mankind lost the first battle, Adam and Eve were in paradise and tempted once, and they failed. But Jesus Christ was tempted more. He was led out into the wilderness and tempted three times by Satan, and resisted them all.

And it's not expressed here in the Gospel of Mark, we have to look in Matthew and Luke, but what's really going on in Satan's tempting is that he's urging Jesus to put aside his humility, put aside his weakness, to put aside his servanthood, to not empty himself of his power...but instead to use his power to save himself and crush his enemies.

Think about it, what's his first temptation?...The Holy Spirit sent him out into the wilderness to not eat any bread or eat anything but to fast for forty days and forty nights, how does Satan tempt him when he's hungry? "If you truly are the Son of God, why don't you turn these stones to bread...you can do it after all...you have the power. Jesus says what?...It is written, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

So Satan tries again. Takes him up to the top of the temple, and Satan's smart...smarter than any of us, and he's figure it out, "Oh Jesus listens to God's word? Okay then!" And he says, "Throw yourself down, for it is written [in God's Word], He will send His angels concerning you, to guard you lest you strike your foot against a stone." "Jesus jump, God will save you." Jesus says, "It is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Finally Satan took him to the top of a tall mountain, and gave him supernatural vision to see all the kingdoms of the world, and Satan is the prince of this world. And he says, I will give all these to you [without having to go to a cross] if you will bow down and worship me." And Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan, for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve." And the jig was up; and Satan left. Jesus was tempted by Satan, but Satan lost, because *Jesus remained steadfast in suffering*. He didn't try to escape it, instead he trusted in his Father to deliver him at the proper time.

James says in our Epistle, “**Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial (testing), for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God promised to those who love him"** (James 1:12). The big test for mankind, to overcome our the slavery to sin and the devil, was already passed not by any of you nor by me, but by Jesus who inherited the crown. Now our only test is to remain in his body, in Him, and not deny Him or what He says. For Jesus is the only one who won the race and ho received the crown. He is our head, and he wears it, and he brings his body, the church to heaven to be where he is. And that is you, precious people of God who hear his word and receive it like water to a parched tongue in the wilderness of this world that would have us suffer forever, Christ came to deliver us to eternity in the proper time His father has determined. Until then as we continue in this life, let us not shun our suffering or put it aside and avoid it, but let us embrace it as God's will for our lives. For death is not the end, Christ is risen, and we will be with him in eternity.