

February 22, 2015

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 25:1-10

Genesis 22:1-14, p. 17

Mark 1:9-15, p. 912

Sermon *Put to the Test*

As you get older you wonder if you remember which stories you have shared and which you haven't. But as a friend of mine walked through his neighborhood, he noticed his elderly neighbor sitting on a porch swing holding an old calico cat in his lap and he was stroking the cat gently which is not unusual because cats like to be stroked, it calms them down and causes them to purr but as he got closer, he noticed that the cat wasn't purring at all but instead he was hissing and he was snapping at that older man in the swing. As he got even closer he could finally see what the problem in this scenario was because instead of stroking the cat from the front to the back the usual way the old man was stroking the cat from the back to the front and you know what that does it, ruffles the fur and it makes the cat angry. Generally he was rubbing the cat the wrong way. When he was right across the lawn from the porch he could, also, see old man was quietly speaking to the cat and when he could understand what his neighbor was saying to the cat, he really didn't know what to think because the man was saying, "turn around cat" "turn around cat." And some of you folks are that way, too I'm afraid.

Today's Gospel lesson speaks to us of the time when Jesus was tested in the wilderness. And there is not one of us here, today if we are honest with ourselves, we have not experienced testing in life; there is not one of us who have not journeyed through what I would call the wilderness of doubt, or despair, or sadness, or sorrow. And when the time of testing comes we tend to do like the cat did in the story, we tend to get our backs up. We get our fur ruffled often we too, are going to hiss and we are going snap at life; when there is serious illness, when there is economic hardship; problems on the job; when there is family discord; or when importantly enough we may be tempted to take short cuts in life which may hurt somebody in the long run. And I am here to tell you, first, that it is perfectly natural for us as human beings to do this, to vent our anger, to vent our frustrations hopefully we can do it in positive ways during the tough times that life brings our way. But as God's people I think, we are called then after the worst of that kind of situations passes is to take that extra step in the process when life brings hardship and we find ourselves in those wilderness experiences in life. Venting, dealing with our emotions accomplishes one thing but that is not the end of the process instead we are called to deal with things that causes us that emotional distress. We

are called to examine, I think, the situations of hardships; the situations of testing very carefully and to seek some meaning, seek some sort of understanding for our lives from them. I think it Henry David Thoreau, he may have stolen it from one of the great philosophers, and if you steal such things you might as well steal them from good people, who said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." And he was correct in a sense it can be is extremely beneficial to the growth of individuals to get insight from each experience that we encounter in life whether a good experience or a difficult experience. The story of the man with the cat suggests that often when life is sort of rubbing us the wrong way; at least one helpful step beyond hissing and snapping might be sort of turn around like the man wanted the cat to do and look at the problem from another perspective. Look at it from another angle to see where the hope might lie in the dark cloud, to see what purpose that God might have for us eventually in that situation as we face our own particular hardship in the wilderness experience.

St. Paul does remind us and I get a great deal of comfort from this passage from Romans 8. "We know that in everything God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. I cling to that often times in difficult situations. So in the light of this, in the light of the story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness can be a kind of great comfort and learning experience for us as we go through the wilderness experiences of our lives; the very fact that Jesus was human and the very fact that he could be tested is a great comfort to me in itself when I am forced to go through such times. But I think it is also, important for us to see how Jesus' baptism first of all occurred before his testing in the wilderness and then his first preaching mission which occurred after the testing all somehow is tied together. The first thing that it tells me is that my own baptism, my own Christian faith doesn't save, doesn't protect me from those times of testing in life. I like, Jesus, have to live in a world as it is. We talked a little bit about that in our study about Genesis, about what kind of world God created. We will talk later a little bit more. But we know some of the realities of life and we are not always protected from those realities.

Secondly, it also reminds me, that often to be a mature person of faith fulfilling God's will to the best of our abilities, as Jesus did; we will experience testing. We will experience trials from time to time during life. It is also fascinating, I think, to see that in Jesus' case in each time the same Holy Spirit at his baptism, in this short passage from Mark, is the same Holy Spirit which drove him into the wilderness to be tested; which goes to show to me that I think we are not alone in times of difficulty and testing is not sent by God to make us fall but instead is part of life which can later to be used to strength us, to test our meld to stretch us to new and better things in our life of faith. Jesus needed to be stretched. Jesus needed to be learning things about of what was coming ahead. He needed to test himself before

he could move on to fulfill God's purpose for his life and often times I think, the same thing is true for each one of us on our journeys of faith. But there is a caveat that we need to pause about and think about and that is the fact we must be extremely careful as we look at our lives; as we look at the lives of others around us that we do not too quickly to see problems and assign some easy answers, some easy labels to those problems during the wilderness experience and thereby judge our own situation or judge the situations of others in the process. Nevertheless during this season of Lent, during the season when we are all the more aware and sensitive to the love which God shows to us that as Jesus himself was tested, we are invited on a journey to examine those wilderness experiences of our own lives to see what good, what we can learn, to see what reward of faith that God might have hidden there in that dark cloud which we may encounter. And again these words which comfort me in the process, "We know that in everything, God works for good for those who love God who are called according to God's purpose and we are to walk by faith during this course of life. And together we say AMEN.