

A Time of Testing Exodus 33:12-23; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22; Psalm 99

This past week has been one of a time of testing for me. I made the mistake of going to see my doctor for a routine check-up and mentioned a few little peculiarities I had noticed going on in my usually trusty and readable body. Of course, my doctor, never one to let well enough alone, hauled out his handy note pad, made a few cryptic notes and ordered a few simple tests while giving me some instructions to follow. My mother told me there would be days like this and I also remember her telling me that there was “a reason it is called the *practice* of medicine. They always like to *practice* on us.” And, indeed they do. While the testing phase is not much fun, there is nothing worse than the waiting phase, especially when one waits alone. Two of the tests produced immediate results, the third hangs in abeyance. The third was one I had never had before and was the most interesting learning experience I have had in a long time.

While going through this process, I remembered preparing to undergo major surgery several years ago, and, even though I had my children fairly close at hand, and nurses from the church hovering nearby, I felt alone. At times this was a difficult feeling and at times I was relieved that I did not have to keep reassuring someone else that “I would be fine, just fine.” Shortly before the procedure, when I felt most alone, I remembered that no matter what happened to me and no matter which side of life I would awaken to, I was never truly on my own. I was safely in the hands of God, who evidently did not want me at that time.

Moses felt alone in this morning’s reading from the book of Exodus. In his loneliness, he boldly asked God who it was that would be with him, as he was leading the nation Israel farther and farther into the wilderness. He had told God, on a previous occasion, that he was not the best speaker there was, so God had Aaron accompany him on his journey to help tell the Israelites what it was God wanted and needed them to do. Aaron seemed to function quite well in this capacity until the time when he helped the Israelites create a golden calf when Moses was a bit slow in his return from the mountain and his little talk with God.

We must always admire the boldness Moses had, he questioned God, argued with God, and even convinced the Creator to change God’s mind when the intent was to destroy the unfaithful “chosen people” once and for all. God informed him, this time, that his Maker would be with him. God tucked Moses into a cleft in the rock as God’s glory passed by so Moses would survive the encounter. It was believed that one could not see the face of God and live. Moses tested God and God tested Moses. What greater test is there than in being asked to believe in what cannot be seen? Both passed their respective tests. Moses would continue to follow this intangible God and God would never leave him alone.

The ruling classes in Jerusalem tested Jesus. They wanted to trap him with his own words. This is not a game that has remained way back in those ancient times, we can see it played expertly in the political arena of our country on an almost daily basis. Jesus was wise in his answer about taxes. He had not come as the political Messiah some had hoped he would be. He had not come to throw the Romans out of power and usher in a new regime.

Jesus had come to bring about the kingdom of God, a new way of doing things that was not of this world. He disappointed many by not stepping out in front of a great political movement. But we know he did not disappoint himself or his God. He separated his duty to God from his duty to the state. Those questioning him were surprised by his answer, the one about giving to the emperor what was due the emperor and to God, what was due God, and, we are told, they went away. This did not stop the times of testing, however, as Jesus walked forward in life with his face set toward Jerusalem.

Times of testing, not to mention persecution, swirled around all the early churches that Paul planted; the one in Thessalonica being no exception. In this First Letter to that church we find a very warm greeting. The entire letter is pastoral and nurturing in nature. It is considered the oldest book in the New Testament, penned around 51 AD.

The church had been established in Thessalonica under serious opposition from the Jewish community. We need to remember that those who followed Jesus were thought to be a sect of Judaism. This branch had not been labeled as “Christian” at this particular time. So, competition had come to town. And, all the things that came with it were noted in the minds of the established Jewish synagogue or temple. Competition for members and money and a suspicion that this new body of believers did not do things the right way. Paul did not stay there long but sent his encouragement to those who were, most likely, tested on a daily basis.

Being put to the test is nothing new for those of us who choose to live life to the fullest. If we are bold and stick our necks out in various areas of life, we find that we will be questioned and tested. And that is never a bad thing. If we are ever to entertain new thoughts, or do new research or find a better way, there always needs to be a time of caution, and maybe even doubt that something will work before we can move forward. We need to puzzle things through and then proceed on the basis that whatever we may learn from a new course of action will add to our knowledge. If we have great success, that is a wonderful blessing. But even if we might fail in our task we will have learned valuable new insights for the future.

Where would Moses have been had he not had the fortitude to question God? Where would we be if the new way of Christ buckled before those who questioned his motives and his methods? And where would the church today be, if those brave small churches of so long ago had not learned that their new way was one that was sustainable in spite of all those who doubted and questioned.

We might be back at square one were it not for all those times of testing that moved people forward in our faith.

In the Thursday morning Study Group we have just started the study of church history. And though we have only gotten through the first few chapters of the book we are using as our resource, we are already shaking our heads at the success and survival of Christianity. It started as a small movement in a land far away and long ago. It is a miracle that it has grown and developed, for better or for worse, into what it has become today. There has been such a “ring of truth” in it for people starving for the message of Christ that it has never been allowed to die in spite of times of deep and troubling testing.

We are part of the present and future of our faith. We are called to carry it forward into the world in spite of many a conflict, many a doubt, and many a fear. We are the present day church still grappling with questions and challenges, yet knowing that we have wonderful strength in our fellowship of like-minded believers. We must look forward to times of testing, for they only make us stronger and more determined to survive for the glory of God and in the name of Christ.

Amen