

THE TIME OF TESTING
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First Congregational Church UCC
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Texts: Exodus 17: 1-7
Matthew 21: 23-32

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

I'm a cartoon maven. I've loved cartoons since I was a little kid, growing up on Third Street here in Corning. I collect cartoons and copy them and save them on my phone. I give them to doctors and dentists, nurses and physical therapists. I email or text them relentlessly to my (mostly) patient family and friends. I found one not long ago from the comic strip called *Born Loser*, produced by Art and Chip Sansom: It shows a man and a woman looking quite serious and standing facing each other. Her arms are folded ominously. He says to her, "Why must you turn every disagreement we have into an argument?" "We're not arguing," she replies, "we're having a discussion about my point of view being correct.... And you just haven't realized it yet."

Our scriptures today are about two arguments. The question in each story, I suppose, is about whose point of view is correct... and who just hasn't realized it yet. I'd like to explore these two passages and reflect with you on what we can learn from them about times of testing in our own lives.

One thing I'd like you to notice is that, in both of our scripture texts for today, a religious leader is in danger. In the passage from Exodus, the people are more than unhappy that they've been led out into the wilderness only to have nothing to drink. The people are mutinous! They don't exactly make any threats -- they just appear to be whining and complaining: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us ... with thirst?" But Moses understands that his life isn't worth much at this point. The people are thirsty, there's no water, they're in a desert -- and he's the guy who led them there! As Moses says to God, "They're almost ready to stone me." In Moses' case, God gives him a get-out-of-stoning-free card. All he has to do

is take the staff with which he separated the waters, saving the people from the Egyptian army, and strike a rock with that same staff. Water will pour forth. The people will drink in the wilderness. And Moses' life will be spared. Moses ends up calling that place Massah and Meribah, the Hebrew words meaning "test" and "quarrel."

In the passage from Matthew's gospel, the danger to Jesus in a time of testing is more subtle. But we know from other such bible passages that the chief priests and elders objected to what Jesus was doing, and they were trying to trap him in a blasphemy. If they succeeded, they would be able to end his ministry and even his life -- which ultimately, they were able to find a way to do. So that's what lies behind their seemingly harmless question about Jesus' "authority" for what he's doing. That's the test. That's their quarrel with the radical rabbi of Nazareth.

Many of these religious leaders of Jesus' time were in one of two camps. There were the Pharisees, and there were the Sadducees. These two groups tended to argue with each other over theological matters such as the literal interpretation of scripture, whether there was an afterlife, and so forth. The Pharisees were the more liberal group. Sort of like the Democrats of the Jewish faith in Jesus' day. And the Sadducees were the conservatives, the Republicans, if you will. But both groups held to the idea that any teacher or prophet or healer had to base what they did on recognized authority. Your efforts at teaching or doing anything else in public was based on the Torah, on the law, and you needed the testimony of at least two respected Jewish teachers of the law from the past to confirm anything you did. Jesus wasn't doing that. He just taught, and healed, and laid out a pathway for people to follow. His authority was his own word. And that was a big no-no in his time and culture.

God doesn't hand Jesus a get-out-of-death-free card in this scripture. Jesus finds an indirect way to avoid the trap laid for him by the religious powers of his day. He simply asks them his own question: Was the baptism of John from heaven or of human origin? Very clever! The majority of the people loved and respected John, the Baptist. He was considered a great prophet. Many had gone to the Jordan River to receive his baptism as a sign of repentance and renewal in their faith. Soooo ... if the leaders said John's baptism was heaven sent, Jesus could ask why the priests and elders opposed the baptism of John. And if they said John's baptism was merely a human act, the people would rise up against them. The

leaders were stuck. Their trap had opened them up to a counter trap. They couldn't say from where John's authority came, and they tell Jesus so. Jesus responds, "If you can't say what the authority was for John's baptism, then I won't tell you where my authority is from." He concludes by telling the story about two sons, one of whom says he won't work in the father's vineyard but then goes and works, and a second son, who says he'll go but doesn't. It's obvious which son honored the father. And, says Jesus, it's just as obvious who honors God in this time: the people who recognized John's authority and who recognize Jesus' authority. If it was the hated tax collectors or the despised prostitutes who recognized the true authority, they would enter God's heavenly realm before any pompous, self-important religious leader. Game, set, match!

So, what about us? You and I may not be in danger of death in our times of testing, but we have them nevertheless. Times of testing may come abruptly or they may sneak up on us. Times of testing may happen to us accidentally, or we may seek them out. Take a moment now to think about one example of a time of testing in your life. We're not Quakers, but I'm going to provide some holy silence for you to consider in your own mind that personal time of testing.

[Quiet time]

Was that time of testing long in the past or was it recent? Was it private or was it quite public? Did you find a get-out-of-testing-free card? Was the testing resolved or is it still stuck in your craw, still a source of irritation and concern? Did it take courage to face that time of testing? Did you seek help in facing it? Did you find yourself praying about it? I'm not talking about a spoken, carefully-worded paragraph beginning with "Dear God," and ending with "Amen." One of the most common prayers in the world is just one word: "Help!" Did you find spiritual resources to deal with your time of testing? Did you discover practical resources?

Some of our times of testing are quite personal. We find ourselves in a difficult spot, which may have developed due to our own actions or due to the actions of others. Or we find ourselves in a difficult spot because of something that just came out of the blue. We may not know how to resolve that situation, but we do know that we have to resolve it – perhaps with the support of others. We may feel inadequate to the task, but we cannot avoid it.

Other times of testing are in the public square. Consider now whether your Christian faith has ever led you to a time of public testing. If we take that faith seriously, if it's a foundation of our lives and not just a pleasant add-on, we can find ourselves in conflict with the circumstances or even the culture in which we live. To dedicate oneself to the path of Jesus is to open oneself to times of testing. "I have decided to follow Jesus," as the hymn goes, "no turning back, no turning back."

Two people died recently whose lives have had an impact on our public life; two people who had a kind of lover's quarrel with the world around them. The news has covered their influence. One was Gloria Steinem, a long-time leader in the women's movement for equality. In her final essay, she wrote: "... words that stand for equality are demonized by those who benefit from inequality" [*The New Yorker*, September 3, 2026]. If you feel called by your faith to speak up for equality, it's likely that your culture will put you in the path of some times of testing. What will you do if and when that happens? Is it happening now?

The other recent loss was the farmer-poet, Wendell Berry, of Kentucky. He once wrote these words:

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.
["Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"]

Times of testing demand much of us. Courage, yes. But also, cleverness. And solidarity with those who seek what we seek for our community, our nation, our world. So, whether our testing is personal or societal, may we find comfort in the staff of Moses and especially in the example of Jesus. If we find ourselves in what John Lewis used to call "good trouble," may our faith accompany us in our journey through the testing. May it be so! Amen.