

## Testing the Waters

September 25, 2011 Ord 26A

*Last week we followed the Israelites into the wilderness where they were starving. God decides to test them by providing manna and Quail for their daily needs, so that they would learn to trust God. Today we follow the children of Israel as they test God and quarrel.*

### **Exodus 17:1-7**

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

17:2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

17:5 The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

17:6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

*We pick up today in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has entered into Jerusalem to face his own death. After showing up on Palm Sunday to a procession and parade, he enters the Temple and begins turning over the tables and upsetting the local authorities with his teachings about God. And now we read about the confrontation between the chief priests, elders and Jesus.*

### **Matthew 21:23-32**

21:23 When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

21:24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

21:25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

21:26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

21:27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

21:28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

21:29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

21:30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

21:31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

21:32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

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Have you ever questioned God? Have you ever tested God?

I mean have you doubted what you have been taught about God?

Have you ever wondered where God is when 1 in 5 children live in poverty in the wealthiest country in the world, the US?

Have you ever wondered why some Christians cheer when a presidential hopeful is given props for the highest number of executions in the nation?

If you have, you are not alone.

Today's Scriptures remind us that those closest to God's heart even question and test God. The Israelites are questioning Moses' leadership and whether God is with them in this seemingly God-forsaken wilderness. And in the Temple the week Jesus meets with death, the religious leaders are questioning Jesus' authority.

The French philosopher Voltaire wrote, "Judge a person not by his answers but his questions."

One reason I loved doing college ministry and working with young adults, is because they ask questions. Many are discovering faith as if for the first time and making it their own. Presbyterians are known for their encouragement of questions, exploration, and discovery. There will be no fill-in-the-blank worksheets in sermons or classes. You have to work at it.

No spoon feeding allowed. We are not teaching to the test.

I think we should put a sign up outside our church, "Questions encouraged here." We'd lose some folks who are looking for simple answers. But Jesus says, ask and you will receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened.

Seeking, asking, questioning is where God reveals himself to both the wilderness children and to the religious authorities in the Temple. This is the rabbi's favorite teaching technique. Certainly it is one of Jesus' favorite teaching techniques.

In our Bible readings today, people of faith are asking hard questions like "Is God with us? Where is God?" The Israelites are testing the waters...asking who's in charge? Moses? God? By whose authority is Moses leading us? And Jesus, who gave you the authority to do these things?

Some people I know are asking hard questions. These questions have come up this week as I met with folks in this church- Why has God allowed so much suffering in my life? If God made humans in God's image, why do we sin? If God saves us through grace, then why do I have to do anything? Why does God allow my child have this disorder? Who's in charge?

Others of us are numb, unconcerned, too busy, or comfortable with simple answers.

Maybe questions arise best out of crisis, like when you dying of thirst in a wilderness. And maybe some of us have not had a real faith crisis that causes us to struggle, to question, yet.

Jesus entertains questions all the time- has his authority questioned...answers with a question...Jesus says talk is cheap...but show in your actions that you obey and follow God You can change your mind and follow. You can count yourself among the tax collectors, crooks, prostitutes, whose repentance and belief is evident in their changed actions. Jesus reminds us that those leading the heavenly procession will be those people that some have deemed sinners and outcasts who have placed their trust and their lives in the hands of the Lord of Life.

That will be some kind of party in heaven. Like the Billy Joel song *Only the Good Die Young*, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints."

The sinners who have received God's grace have so much to rejoice about! I am sure that made the religious leaders and elders to grumble. It makes some of us grumble, too.

When you accept and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of your life and that God is the ultimate authority, your priorities change. How you spend your time and your treasure will change. Jesus tells a parable of two sons told to go labor in the vineyard by the father. One says, "sure Dad and does nothing. The other says, "no thanks", and then changes his mind. Which one did the will of the father? The one who went out and worked, the one who obeyed with his actions and not just his lips. Paul's letter to the Philippians puts it this way,

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

(Phil. 2:12-13)

So here is a little test for us, consider these questions today:

1. On what and whom do you spend your time and money on?
2. Do you spend time with the least, the lost, the left-out as Jesus did? Do you give water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, education to the poor child?
3. Do you visit the sick, encourage the addicted and confused, visit the imprisoned- whether the prison is a jail, a nursing home, or troubled home life?
4. Do you worship the idols of work, success, status, entertainment, sports rather than God? Do those things have an authority and power over you?

5. Do you read the internet and newspaper more than you read the Bible and seek to understand God's intentions through study and prayer?
6. Do you support public policy that seeks justice, loves mercy, and loves your neighbor as yourself? Ultimately, when you join in the heavenly party and reflect on your life, will God look at you and say, "well done, good and faithful servant?"

These are the hard questions.

I used to hate cemeteries. I find it ironic that now I work at one- memorial garden and the Columbarium. I have grown comfortable with death. My father was the deacon responsible for the care and upkeep of the Beersheba Presbyterian Church cemetery. My brothers and father spent many a Saturday mowing, trimming, and taking care of those old cemetery plots. There are headstones from the 1700s and many of my family there. I used to hate when my father would take me and drive out to the cemetery at night to check on things like vandals breaking the old headstones.

I was talking to someone this week who said, the older we get the more time we spend in cemeteries. In the wake of losing his father and his son in the span of 1 year, I have grown to understand why my father loved that cemetery. I think he was literally working out his salvation with God. We realize we have a place in the universe. We realize we are a part of a web of people who have gone before. We realize that life is fleeting and we have to face our own mortality like people in the wilderness facing death without water.

Dr. Peter Hobbie, my religion professor in college took us to the First Presbyterian church cemetery one day for class. We walked in silence. He asked us to wander and read the headstones. After awhile, he posed this question- What would you write on your head stone? What would you want people to see in your life? In some ways he was asking about our mission, our objectives in life.

Author's Ridge is at the Sleepy Hollow graveyard in Concord, Massachusetts where American transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau, are buried. Emerson's headstone is big, bold- a white quartz boulder with a bronze plaque with his name and his words, "passive Master in the hands of the Over-Soul." His friend Henry David Thoreau's grave marker is a contrast. A white stone the size of a brick reads, "Henry" and "Simplify, simplify."

In that same cemetery there are the graves of a medical doctor and a pastor. The doctor's grave is marked by a reddish headstone the size of a small billboard. There is a recitation of his professional accomplishments and organizations he served- more of a resume or a job application. The pastor's grave on the other hand is marked with a smaller headstone with this inscription from Micah 6:8, "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." <sup>1</sup>

Who do you think was the authority for each one's life?

I think I will spend some time this week in our memorial garden and ponder what I would put on my headstone. I think it will be different than it was on that day in college at the First Presbyterian church cemetery.

So I have a few questions for you:

When you consider your life from the point of view of your death, what will it say about you?

When Jesus speaks of the two brothers who were asked by the father to go work in the vineyard, which one does the will of the father? The one who said what the father wanted to hear? Or the one who changed his mind, and did what the father asked of him?

There is still time to change your mind like the son. You and I can start right now, right here, and live life in light of your mortality.

Peter Scheibner is name of the man who should have been piloting an airplane that flew into the World Trade Center tower on September 11, 2001. He tells his story in a short movie, a youtube video called *In my Seat*. He was prepared to fly out of Boston that day and was bumped just hours before leaving by another pilot with seniority. The pilot who lost his life was named Tom McGuinness. Peter tells an emotional story of realizing that it could have been him that day. He dedicates this movie to McGuinness. He was faced with his mortality on that day.

In reflection, he recommits to a mission statement he wrote 20 years before...

“To seek, trust and glorify God, through humble service and continual prayer. To raise up qualified disciples as quickly as possible so that one day I might hear God say, ‘well done, my good and faithful servant!’”

In reflection Peter Scheibner states, “The events of Sept 11 took that life objective and intensified it. I need to act like I’m living on borrowed time because I am. I should have died but I didn’t and now I have an obligation that comes with that. I’ve got to live my days with a sense of urgency. This is not about me, but the distinct privilege I have been given to know that someone died in my place not once, but twice. Jesus Christ didn’t sit in my seat like Tom, but hung a cross for me.”

Peter decided to have his words match his work and actions in a greater way.

He felt obligated to work for God’s purposes, not out of guilt but out of gratitude.

He is a man on a mission.

Does God have authority over your life?

Does your life bear the fruit of obedience to God?

Mark Hatfield, an evangelical Baptist Republican senator from Oregon, was known for his bold stances in Congress because of his faith. He stood in opposition to the Vietnam war, supported a consistent ethic of life on abortion and the death penalty, and influenced the Rev. Billy Graham to stand in opposition to the nuclear arms race. His Christian witness showed his commitment to the highest authority, Jesus Christ. In his memoir, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, he wrote,

*Radical allegiance to Jesus Christ transforms one's entire perspective on political reality. Priorities become totally changed; a whole new understanding of what is truly important bursts forth. There is an uncompromised identification with the needs of the poor and oppressed. One is placed in fundamental opposition to structures of injustice and forms of national idolatry. Further, there is a commitment to the power of love as the only means to the end.*<sup>3</sup>

Senator Hatfield died this year. He was willing to wrestle with his faith and the hard questions, and live the Christian ethic even in the political arena.

Well done, sir, well done.

So finally, the last hard question for you to ponder this week:

When you consider your life from the point of view of your death, what will it say about you?

And what will your life say about God's authority over your life?

There's still time to change your mind. Like John the baptizer preached, "Repent and believe."

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<sup>1</sup> Clay Olglesby "Living by the Word," in *the Christian Century*, September 20, 2011 Vol. 128, No. 19

<sup>2</sup> Peter Scheibner, *In my Seat*, on youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLj4akmncsA&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>3</sup> Wesley Granberg-Michelson, "The Peacable Senator, Mark O. Hatfield, 1922-2011," in *the Christian Century*, September 20, 2011 Vol. 128, No. 19

