

The Way Home: The Test Pattern

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Exodus 17:1-7

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Here's the thing about falling in love: The first time you do it, it's hard to believe that anyone in all of human history has ever felt like you feel at that giddy moment.

Oh, there's plenty of evidence to the contrary, like two-thirds of all the songs ever written, and *Romeo & Juliet*, and a whole bunch of movies, right? But before you fall in love for the first time, you just have no clue what it's all about. And when you're *in* love, it seems so *personal* that it's like no one has ever felt this way before.

And here's the thing about *mourning* the *loss* of someone you love: *That's* personal, too. It hurts so much that it feels like no one has ever hurt like this before. And you know that people have lived and loved and died for thousands and thousands of years, but surely not like *this*. Surely *they* didn't hurt *this* much.

The apostle Paul recognizes that feeling in his letter to the Corinthians, and he hastens to assure the church at Corinth, which is going through terrible persecution, that "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone." Everyone goes through hard times, he reminds them. Everybody hurts. It's just part of being human.

But then Paul goes on to remind them of one of the revolutionary parts of the new Christian faith. Because Jesus has come, he says, we *know* that God's faithfulness surrounds us even in our most painful times and even on beyond death. And we know this because of Jesus' time of testing that we here are recalling during this season of Lent – the sequence of events that will lead up to the very worst, his painful execution. Jesus has become our example of what it means to live with full confidence in God, in perfect faith, even when the going gets tough.

So the challenge, I think, is to remember that, when we're caught up in those times of testing. To remember Jesus' example of living faithfully even through the worst. And so this morning I want us to think together about something that Paul *almost* says here, and it's something you've probably heard from well-meaning people trying to offer consolation. They say this: "God never gives us more than we can handle."

And maybe hearing that makes you think to yourself: So God is *inflicting* this misery on me to make me *better* somehow? So if I were a weaker person, maybe I'd be having an easier time of it?

It makes me think of the old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon when Calvin gets hold of his father's glasses and launches into a parody. He puts the glasses on and walks around commanding, "Calvin, go do something you hate! Being miserable builds character!" Maybe some of you have had a father like that.

But that's not God. And I want to argue this morning that that's a mistaken impression of how God is working through our times of testing. For me, it's hard to imagine a God who *imposes* trouble on us, even if it's for our own good. Instead, it seems to me that those times of hardship come of our own making, our out of the frailty of our bodies or our minds, or just unexplainably and tragically – the mysterious fire, the random car crash, the killer tsunami.

And in this passage, Paul assures us that God's faith in us – met with our faith in God – always is enough to bear us up under our burdens, to meet the tests that life presents us. Because

really, what's the alternative? Despair. And God is not about despair. God is about hope – hope that our lives will be better tomorrow than they are today, hope for healing even when there is no cure, and finally, hope for our eternal reward in heaven and hope that our world will someday be the place where the Kingdom of God, like the tulips in May, bursts forth in all its glory.

Paul is talking about hope when he says, “With the testing, he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

Across the street from the World Trade Center site in New York City is a little church called St. Paul's Chapel. When the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 came, the church became really the epicenter of ministry to the firefighters and the other rescue workers who ended up working at ground zero for better than a year.

That ministry took the form of meals and showers and endless pots of coffee and a place on the pew to sleep for a few hours. But it also took the form of a quiet place away from that horrific chaos and destruction, a place just to sit and recover a little bit, to meditate or pray or just simply close oneself off from this incredible disaster for an hour or two.

And, of course, it took the form of support from clergy members and social workers and counselors who ministered to these workers' spirits, so that they might emerge from *their* time of testing unbroken and whole in spirit. “God provides the way out in times of testing.” For those rescue workers, that little church and the people who descended on it *were* that way out – across the street and into Jesus' arms.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble – that's what the Psalms assure us. But it's not a help that is painless for God to provide. Remember that God needed to sacrifice God's only child to complete the story. And so there's a way in which, as we remember the homeward journey of Lent and Easter, *God* is being tested as well. God is going through an unimaginable grief, a grief never before known in the history of the universe, because Jesus' death is unique. Lots of people were crucified – remember, Jesus died between two thieves – but no one else would ever embrace that terrible end and do it for the sake of God's beloved children.

And yet we know how the story ends. Jesus lives! God lives! And when Paul assures us that God is faithful, we know that to be true because God himself has suffered and has come out the other side. *Our* sufferings, *our* times of testing, can be just brutal. You don't need me to tell you that. But the word this morning is that God will not forget us. Because God has been there, and God cares about us even in the midst of our trials, maybe especially in the midst of those trials. And when there seems to be no way, God will make a way for us.

And all of this, all of this, is couched in the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul writes about the Hebrews drinking from the “spiritual rock,” and partly he is referring to the accounts of how Moses struck the rock with his staff in the desert and it gushed forth water in abundance. But for Paul, that rock represents Jesus Christ. In a very real way, Jesus *is* our spiritual sustenance; Jesus is the way we begin to apprehend just how it is that God loves us, God's people, so deeply, what that feels like, what that looks like.

It looks like Jesus. It looks like Jesus healing the sick. It looks like Jesus teaching and showing us what it means to live in love. It looks like Jesus turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple and fighting to return people to faith instead of blind lockstep obedience to the teachings of any church. And it looks like Jesus suffering through his last hours on the cross so that each of us can be saved. Each person in this sanctuary, each of us, all of us –

Christ died so that we can look at that picture in our mind's eye and know, *this* is love. *This* is sacrifice. *This* is power.

I think about the men and women who came back from the Vietnam War and the different ways they coped with the terrible things they went through there, and the ways they still struggle with those memories. And it's mysterious to me why some of them were able to come back into the mainstream of daily life hardly skipping a beat, while others were just so devastated by the experience that they're still emotionally disabled by it.

And there's all kinds of middle ground, too, like the veterans a friend of mine worked with at the foam rubber factory. They had been through hell, and it did a couple of things to them: It made them fiercely loyal to each other and to their friends; and it made them care less about the petty stuff that a lot of the business world is based on. If some bean counter chewed them out for not making their quota, they were just utterly unmoved. They had seen death, so they knew the value of life, and they weren't going to waste it worrying about trivialities. They didn't sweat the small stuff.

You see that also sometimes in people who have survived terrible illnesses, people who have been in car crashes or even plane crashes and miraculously walked away alive, men who never stopped working until they had the heart attack that almost killed them. That kind of testing, sudden and intense – it changes people. Somehow – whether it was God's hand or just dumb luck – they are alive where probably they shouldn't expect to be. And they find themselves in a different place in their life and their understanding of who they are and who God is. God has shown them the way out, not only of their trials, but out of the self-absorption or overwork or bitterness that they had been caught up in. That's the kind of healing miracle that can happen when you emerge from a time of testing with the realization that God has not lost faith in you.

There are no guarantees here. Paul notes that a lot of the Hebrews never made it to the Promised Land – they were struck down in the wilderness, thousands of them, in what Paul interprets as punishment for not keeping their faith pure. But Paul is exhorting us to learn from their mistakes – when we are tested, to not abandon our faith but rather to hold it more tightly. When the going gets tough, pray more.

I want to tell you in closing about a little girl whose big brother often told her about how much fun it was to play up on top of a hill not far from their house, a hill she had never been up. She pestered and pestered him, and finally he agreed to take her up there. But when they got to the base of the hill, she looked at the trail up and said, "But there's isn't a smooth place anywhere here! It's all bumpy and stony."

Sure is, said her wise older brother. "But how else would we ever get to the top if it weren't? The stones and bumps are what we step on to get there."

May it be so. Amen.