

Done And Undone

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,
that our ancestors were all under the cloud,
and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized
into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,
and all ate the same spiritual food,
and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them,
and the rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them,
and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us,
so that we might not desire evil as they did.

Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written,
“The people sat down to eat and drink,
and they rose up to play.”

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did,
and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did,
and were destroyed by serpents.

And do not complain as some of them did,
and were destroyed by the destroyer.

These things happened to them to serve as an example,
and they were written down to instruct us,
on whom the ends of the ages have come.

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.

God is faithful,

and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
but with the testing he will also provide the way out
so that you may be able to endure it.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for God has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon God while God is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD,
that God may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

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Isaiah 55:1-9; I Corinthians 10:1-13

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I.

Whew! Where to begin, huh? Let's start with the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, a fairly strong and traditionally Lentesque text. When we study Paul, we always remember that he is writing to specific people in the hopes of addressing specific issues; in this instance, a congregation located in one of the most important cities of Greece which often struggled with the ambient practices endemic to that pagan environment. So, although we often take his words and theological perspectives and apply them universally to the human condition, this was not his original intent in penning them. I remind us of this in order to put today's Pauline text in a more accurate focus.

II.

My sense is, and you are free to disagree, that historically the Christian Church has demonstrated an almost perverse delight in focusing on human immorality and the efforts to resist such temptations. So, over the centuries, a text such as this helped to reinforce an understanding, and foster the fear, of a great evil force scouring both countryside and city streets alike, hoping to corrupt innocent Christians and, in the symbology of Star Wars, turn them to the Dark Side. We read in today's sermon text admonitions against idolatry and sexual immorality, and warnings to the reader not to put Christ to the test, for like those who did, those who do will be destroyed by the Destroyer; ostensibly Satan.

III.

Over the centuries, then, a posture arose within the church, which said, at the least, ours is a God who allows us to be tested; or, at the most, God is the one who actually does the testing (ala the story of Job). Over these same centuries, the church was seen as a person's one ally in identifying such temptation, clearly *defining* right from wrong and helping to establish and reinforce the society's moral standards, *helping* the believer to resist temptation through teaching, right doctrine and the proclamation of word, and

absolving the believer through the sacraments when they, inevitably, yielded to temptation, in one form or another, as people always do (ala all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God).

IV.

The one hope and promise which people held onto in all of this is conveyed quite succinctly in today's text: "*God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength.*" A belief we find wildly abundant, even in our own day and age, usually expressed as, "*God won't give you more than you can handle.*" The message being, muster your own strength, faith and courage and you'll get through.

And, so, we set a life stage which pits human piety, obedience and endurance against a cosmological dark force relentless and masterful in pursuing us. The Lenten season, then, has been the traditional showcase for this epic battle, being waged all around us and in all ages, calling us to resist temptation and endure our sufferings.

V.

Too often, though, we forget what follows Paul's words about not being tested beyond our strength. Paul goes on to say, "*With the testing God will also provide the way out so you may be able to endure it.*" This, of course, is the *other* message of Lent, the far more important message, I would argue.

Note, the English translation of Paul's Greek is accurate and precise: not "a" way out, as if some one way among many will arise; but rather, "the" way out, the one and only. This, of course, we take to mean not the sacraments of the church, but that to which the sacraments point: the salvific and redemptive act of Christ, who resisted all temptation, to die on the cross and save us from our sins.

VI.

Let us now turn our attention to the other lectionary passage for today, Isaiah 55:1-9, as it offers us something of a different perspective. While Paul's words, and 2000 years of Church doctrine and culture present a model which sees humanity as ever trying to climb out of a hole, hoping, at best, to simply endure our inevitable sufferings, the Prophet Isaiah says: "*Are you thirsty, come and drink, the water is here. What? You have no money? Here, food*

without cost, wine and milk without price. Why do you spend money on that which does not sustain, and labor for that which does not satisfy? Instead, eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food.”

VII.

The author of Isaiah (actually there are 2 or even 3 authors) is also writing to a specific people in the hope of addressing a specific issue; in this instance, writing to the people of Judah and Jerusalem at a time when they had been annexed by, and living under the shadow of, the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah criticizes them for their social injustice which has strained their tenuous relationship with God. Isaiah calls the Hebrews to righteousness and prophesies the assurance of divine blessing upon the faithful, and punishment upon the faithless. Isaiah also foretells of an everlasting covenant admonishing the people (to): *“Seek the Lord while God may be found, call upon God while God is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that God may have mercy on them, and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon.”*

VIII.

Whereas the I Corinthians passage sees a struggle to *endure* the bad, with God, through the cross, eventually saving us, Isaiah seems to encourage a *return* to God, seemingly a task *within* our power, where life may be lived in abundance, with water, food, milk and wine freely given; not just surviving but thriving.

So, today, we discover two related, but somewhat different perspectives on Lent and a solution to the problems we create for ourselves: Paul’s repent, hang in there and wait for God’s salvation; and Isaiah’s repent, get moving and return to God’s abundance. I don’t think it necessary, or even wise, to set these two approaches in opposition to each other. Instead of seeing this as an either/or situation, I would argue for both/and.

IX.

I’d like to ask you to consider that both of these are similar, though very distinct tools for our spiritual tool kit (and, as some in the congregation will say, the more tools is always better) each of these tools is uniquely suited and the most effective for the specific job.

Now, mercifully, I've successfully avoided telling you the personal circumstance which prompted me to address the notion of resisting temptation in today's sermon. Suffice to say, this week I was cunningly and subtly lured, ever so briefly, over to the dark side. I didn't do anything while I was over there, though I was in a position to; but, I caught myself.

X.

In the process giving myself a spiritual slap on the back of head, the passage from Isaiah harkened to me and made me ask, "Why would I spend my money (i.e., time & energy) on that which is not bread (i.e., will not sustain me)? Worse, why would I create in the lives of others a situation that would put them to the test? Thankfully, I moved myself back into the light.

The experience, though, helped me to realize that at this point in my life, barring any *staggering* lapses of judgement, I'm past the "BIG Mistakes." I've certainly made more than my share, but I've learned from them; I've spent my time suffering, being tested, and waiting for God to deliver me because so bad was the mess that only God could.

Now, it seems, it is a matter of avoiding the "Little Mistake." Those subtle things which cause us to stray, ever so slightly, from the light over into the darkness. Those things which cause us to merely stumble, rather than trip and fall off of a cliff. Those things, which in-and-of-themselves, are correctable from our own efforts. But, those things, which left uncorrected and allowed to multiply, can bump us up to the level of the *Big* Mistake.

XI.

Finally, I'm quite confident that each of you sitting here today, have struggled, will struggle or, perhaps, are struggling even now with such temptations, large or small. If you've made the Big Mistake, hold on tight my brother or sister, you *have* the strength to see this through, and now must have the faith that *God* will provide you *the* way out. If you've made the Little Mistake, let today be wake-up call that you need to get *on* this, right now, don't wait; do what you need to do to start moving move back into the light. This is Lent, after all, time to take stock of both what we've done, and what we've left undone. Amen.