

“Facing the Test” by David Lloyd



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Three weeks ago Sharon and I flew to Las Vegas – that American counterpart to Sodom and Gomorrah – and then drove over to Death Valley National Park in California. While you were shoveling out from that Saturday’s first snow and then the midweek snow, we were hiking in canyons in temperatures that ranged from the low to high 60’s. We were there a little early in the year – late March and early April are the best temperatures, but we knew we shouldn’t go in the summer when daytime temperatures hit 120 degrees and the temperature of rocks can reach 200 degrees. Even in our pleasant temperatures we drank lots of water to avoid dehydration – there was always a breeze that evaporated all moisture.

You know the story of how Death Valley got its name: some 49ers got lost there and died. Actually, the story is more a story about being tested. In October of 1849 a large party of young men and a few families, almost all from Illinois, left

Provo, Utah in wagons to take the Spanish Trail south/southwest to what was then the village of Los Angeles because it was too late in the season to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert and struggle over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They all had gold fever, which meant they were in a hurry to get to California before others found all the gold, so some of them split off in southwest Utah to take a shortcut shown on a map – one that was mostly erroneous as it turned out – by a stranger who joined them. He soon left them but they continued without even the false map. By Christmas Eve they were well within the current boundaries of the national park. They had spent two months trekking with difficulty through semi-deserts with little fodder and water and across deserts with no fodder or water, down into and up out of steep canyons. The oxen pulling their wagons were exhausted and half starved and thirsty, and their horses weren't in much better shape. And now they had blindly entered the first of two dangerous deserts, not knowing where they were or how far they had to go, only knowing that they had to get out of this place – they were living in the face of death, death from dehydration, not from heat. The young men slaughtered their livestock and burned their wagons to smoke the meat into jerky. When they reached a settlement after having straggled over several steep passes and deserts, they had lost half their body weight. They revived and continued on the arduous trek across the second desert, the Mojave. All of these young men made it to Los Angeles except for nine who split off, disappeared, and were never seen again. The families back in Death Valley struggled more, mostly due to a lack of food and fodder. They sent their two best men to bring back help in two weeks. The two men finally returned after 26 days with fodder, food and water to find that only one elderly man had died in Death Valley the day before. He was the only person who died within the valley. When they got to the top of the pass that led out and looked back, one called out, "Goodbye, Death Valley!" and the name stuck. Both groups made it to California, but only a very few of them increased their income

through prospecting or mining – a few got wealthy providing supplies or services to prospectors and miners! Most eventually returned to the Midwest.

The survivors of Death Valley met periodically for reunions, and they would retell their story to their children and grandchildren – probably leaving out some of the details that they knew their spouses and the younger generation couldn't fully understand unless they too had lived in the face of death. But one part of the story got retold frequently. One of the families was a minister, Rev. Brier, who was going to preach to those godless miners in California, although he was reputed to have a bit of gold fever himself. His wife, Juliette, called "Julia," was barely 5 feet tall and weighed about 100 pounds. Throughout the whole trek from Provo to Los Angeles she would go back and forth to encourage others and help them, frequently walking with one of her children clutching her skirt, another clinging to her back while she carried her baby in her arms. She chose to live in the face of death and bring life to others. After they reached safety, three of the baby girls born to the survivors were named "Julia" to honor her. And through the whole ordeal she lost less than 10 pounds!

Stories are important. They tell us who we are. This week's passage from Deuteronomy summarizes about 500 years of Jewish history, from the period of Abraham, the wandering Aramean, through the period of captivity in Egypt and the Exodus from it, to their entry into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. It's Israel telling its own story, as if our daughter Meredith was telling me – as she has frequently, "I just want the short version, Dad." These five sentences are highly selective – they omit the dark side of the Israelites' story: the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to die in the

desert, Abraham's binding of Isaac that nearly led to Isaac's sacrificial death, Jacob's fear of vengeance from Esau, the famine that led Joseph's brothers to bring their families into Egypt, the Egyptians' killing of newborn Israelite baby boys, Moses' killing of the Egyptian overseer, God's killing of the firstborn Egyptian males during the first Passover, the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Sea of Reeds, the deaths in battles with the Amalekites on the way to the Promised Land, the deaths of those who had rebelled against God during that journey, and the deaths of the Canaanites during the conquest of the Promised Land. These five sentences only tell the story of those who kept their faith, living in the face of death. And they omit the later story of the people after they entered into the Promised Land.

According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus faced the prospect of death at the beginning of his ministry as well as at the end of it. I suspect that Jesus was still in the process of discerning his call at the time of his baptism. He knew that his cousin, John the Baptizer, was following God's call and that for John it included a prophetic challenge to the lives of the elite in Jerusalem and particularly to the family of Herod, the Roman's puppet ruler of Galilee and Perea. Such faithfulness to his call was likely to bring about John's arrest and execution. Was that what following God's call would mean for him, too? When John baptized him at the Jordan River at the edge of the Judean wilderness, Jesus had heard God proclaim him as God's Son. What did this mean? To find out, to discern his call, Jesus went off to fast by himself into the Judean wilderness, somewhere in the rough Jordan valley near Jericho. Fasting in the wilderness can help you discern your call – ask Peter Bankson or Mollie McMurray about their vision quest experiences in the American wilderness. The Judean wilderness was and is especially tough country – I think it

looks like Zabriskie Point in Death Valley. You can die there even without fasting – the famous Anglican bishop James Pike died there about 40 years ago when he got stranded on a day's excursion. It was there, facing death from starvation or dehydration or from wild beasts, after he thought he knew what his call was about, what it meant to be the Son of God, that Jesus was tested.

We get slightly different accounts of the testing in Matthew's account and Luke's account. They both agree that the first test challenged Jesus to change stones to bread. The real challenge was directly to what occurred at his baptism. He had heard God's voice declare him to be God's son; now that his claiming of that call was questioned: "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." It was a test of his confidence in his call, had he discerned it correctly? In Matthew's second test, Jesus was reminded of Psalm 91, in which the Psalmist declared that for those who trusted totally in God, angels would guard their every movement and would lift them up to prevent their foot from striking against a stone. The test dared Jesus to intentionally jump off a parapet of the Temple to see if God would live up to the Psalmist's promise. But the Psalm does not speak of God providing safety for those who act with suicidal intent. The test was asking Jesus to follow his call recklessly, assuming that there would be no consequences. The third test recorded by Matthew was whether Jesus could be faithful to the God of Israel and only the God of Israel, to obey the first and foremost of the Ten Commandments – turning down all the power and glory of earthly kingdoms that claim allegiance away from God.

Matthew aligned the three tests in this order deliberately. They echo the tests Moses experienced after the Exodus – responding to the people's demand for food, risking his death

by climbing Sinai and coming into God's presence, and responding to the people's worship of the golden bull, the fertility god that his brother Aaron had crafted. Matthew was aligning the testing of Jesus with the testing of Moses, implying that Jesus was the new leader/lawgiver for the Jewish people. In his response to each test Jesus quoted scripture, specifically, he quoted Deuteronomy in the Torah, showing his deep devotion as a faithful Jew to God's word as given to Moses, and linking back to the story in Deuteronomy, "My father was a wandering Aramean..." Matthew is assumed to have written his Gospel for Christians, whether originally Jewish or Gentile, who were knowledgeable about Judaism and still in dialogue with Jews. Thus, Matthew's Gospel implies that Jesus is the culmination of Jewish theology and history. In his Gospel, at the end of the tests the devil left and angels came to minister to Jesus, as foretold in Psalm 91.

Luke used the same three tests but changed their order by moving the test of jumping off the parapet to be the last of the three tests. Luke is assumed to have written his gospel primarily for Gentile Christians who may have been less interested in Jesus' link to the Jewish story and more interested in his ministry, teaching, and Passion. In Luke's gospel the first test foretold the challenge for Jesus to feed the spiritually hungry but not to win the people over merely by feeding them through miraculous means. The second test, to turn down all the power and glory of earthly kingdoms foretold the difficulty Jesus had in communicating his alternative vision for the way people might live, a direct challenge to political authority and the class system, what John Dominic Crossan calls the "domination system." The last test, as Luke told it, foretold whether Jesus was willing to risk his death, not through recklessness but through faithfulness. At the end of the tests, the devil left, biding his time for another opportunity, which of course came during the culmination of

Lent, on Good Friday. Thus, although in Luke's version Jesus gave the same answers as he did in Matthew's account, Luke's reordering of the tests does not link backward to Moses' leadership but forward to a new story that was yet to be written.

In the churches of my youth, preaching on the temptation of Jesus always moved from the three temptations he faced to a discussion of the temptations each of us might face, especially the moral ones: greed, lust, gluttony and drunkenness, unrighteous anger, a failure to forgive others, and so forth. But there is another way to look at the story, through the lens of God's call. If we look at Jesus' temptation through the lens of call, the tests were for him to decide what being the Son of God meant: whether it was to be just about rescuing the have-not's of the world, or whether it was to be about winning converts by spectacular daredevil acts, or whether it was about competing with Rome for political power. Jesus rejected all of these options.

At each of our baptisms each of us was adopted as a son or daughter of God. Like Jesus, each of us can look at our individual call, and try to identify the tests that are for us in deciding how to live out that call. David, if you are beloved of God, an adopted son of God, tell this stone to become bread. (Are you sure you are beloved? The truth is, each of us must face the first test of our confidence.) David, you can bring about God's kingdom if you just work within the system. David, you can risk everything to get everyone to join you; God will take care of you.

It is important to look at the story of the temptation of Jesus through the lens of individual call, but that is not

enough. The Gospels were primarily written to and for those little unimportant Christian congregations in the first century. They were the Body of Christ. So the tests were tests for those congregations in the corporate sense, not just for each individual within them. Each congregation had to wrestle with doubt about whether it was truly beloved by God, especially if the congregation was in conflict with both Jewish synagogues and omnipresent Gentile spirituality. What would gain them converts? Feeding them? This was tempting, especially in a time when famines occurred frequently. Should they dare persecution from the Roman authorities and rely on God to work a miracle to save them? Should they give up "the Jesus Way, the nonviolent countercultural challenge to the Roman domination system? Or conversely, should they rise up in violent rebellion as the Jews had? Each congregation had to face these tests while living in the face of death. What was its story to be?

I believe that Seekers Church, this beloved local expression of the Body of Christ has been and will be tested. We as Seekers Church should consider what challenges, what tests, what temptations have been posed to us as a congregation. Have we been living corporately in the face of death? We have the story of our first 30 years –it's in the publication, *A Guide to Seekers Church*, on our Seekers Web site, and in the documents listed the section "Our History," there, and also including the book Marjory Bankson wrote. Some of these histories include the tests of our congregation we have had so far. We may disagree as to whether all of them are included. We may disagree as to whether we successfully met them. I invite you to consider what tests we have had, and maybe we can talk about them in coffee hours or in other sermons.

What tests will we face ahead as a congregation? Maybe you

foresee some for us, and maybe we can talk about them in coffee hours or in other sermons. I wonder what our story will be 500 years from now.

Will it be only five sentences long? Will our story as Seekers Church be remembered as a time when we survived faithfully in the Death Valley of a culture that has abandoned the God of love for a love of money, sex, violence, and environmental destruction? We cannot know, but we can live as if we want that to be our story. Like Julia we can face death, and choose to bring life.