

OCTOBER 18TH SERMON

"EVERY DAY IS A TEST"

Moses wants assurance that God is truly the one in charge, present and at the ready to assist. God gifts Moses with a glimpse of glory to seal the promise. Certain tasks and challenges require a large measure of divine power and those engaged in them need to know they are not alone. The oldest document in the NT, 1 Thessalonians, holds up another kind of test: that of early Christians trying to be faithful in a hostile context. Even though they are persecuted, they hold fast and in the process become a witness and example to others and the recipients of Paul's praise. Finally in the gospel reading, Jesus is put to the test yet again by religious leaders intent on trapping him. This time the question they proffer is about taxes. (How timely) Should they be paid or not? Jesus' response, knowing their malice, sends them packing, astonished and no doubt enraged.

Tests. Lots of tests this week. Testing of God, testing of disciples, testing of leaders. Those being put to the test in these three texts rise to the challenge. Moses gets God's glorious assurance. The Thessalonians keep the faith. Jesus amazes and silences those bent on his destruction. Sounds neat and tidy and certain. And yet we know that a life of faith, of following God's call and of discipleship is often messy, chaotic and filled with doubt. Our pleas for God to show up and give us rest feel unheard. We often crumble under cultures' pressures and abandon God's commandments for socially acceptable idols. We, too, come to Jesus with less than genuine motives and use him to justify ungodly ends.

The stories this week end well, but we know that they represent only a small portion of the redemption narrative---one that includes a

scene with those malice-filled religious leaders getting their way and seeing Jesus dead on the cross. And sure the Thessalonians were not loving and faithful all the time. Not even the most devout among us manages that. Even documented saints had chapters in their lives of notorius sin. Not to mention Moses will, in fact, leave Sinai but it is far from smooth sailing from there on out for the Israelite people.

Given the reality that passing this week's tests will not necessarily mean that next week's challenges are met with victory, what's important about these readings? What do we 21st century disciples living in the middle of a pandemic, weeks away from a contentious election, struggling to address racial injustice, climate change and economic disparity have to learn from God's glory revealed to Moses and the stalwartness of the Thessalonian Christians and Jesus' answer about taxes?

Well, perhaps, to begin we could lean on another verse from Matthew's gospel, which reads: "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Mt.6:34)." Could we attend to what is in front of us right now? I wonder if I might have missed seeing God's glory given my tendency to get distracted or hyper-focused on the wrong things or simply oblivious to my surroundings. I sometimes remind myself, literally, to look up. I might have been checking my email as God blew by me, sure that my inbox was more important than God's inbreaking. Could we attempt to be on the alert, on watch, for God with us?

Could we notice and give thanks for the people being faithful right now, despite the pressure to be otherwise? There are people of faith and people of no faith, living with integrity when no one is watching. There are certified nursing assistants lovingly caring for nursing home residents who cannot see family right now, or who have no family. There are essential workers showing up daily and

for little pay. Could we rejoice when God's goodness gets the better of people, even if only temporarily, and then remember the truth that God's goodness will not lose, ultimately? Jesus tells those death-plotting religious leaders to pay to Caesar what is owed to Caesar and give to God that which is God's. Case closed. Next. Jesus refuses to take the bait and instead shuts down the haters. He does not meet malice with malice but instead speaks truth to power. Might we do likewise? (Omitting the part where he calls them hypocrites because, let's face it, that is not our call.) I see this exchange as an "as for me and my household" sort of moment. As if Jesus tells the Pharisees, "Look, I don't know what you are going to do, but here is how I see it and therefore this is how I am going to act." I wonder if we could try this method of communication. Could we know and articulate our moral framework and rock-bottom values and state it plainly, boldly? No cajoling, no demonizing others, just "as for me and my house" we are going to give God what is God's, which is of course our life, our soul, our mind, our all. Then let those with malice do with that what they will, knowing God will do the rest.

All these passed tests this week do not guarantee that next week's tests will be conquered, too. We will miss seeing God, doubt God's promises, feel certain we are God-forsaken at times. We will fail to do what is right and do the very things we hate instead. We will be the one coming to Jesus with malice and yes, some days, evil gets a temporary but very costly win. And yet, today's worries are enough for today. Today's tests are all we can take today even as God's power is available and sure always. Can we trust and act out of that reality, just today?