

“Testing God”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 19, 2009

Text: “He called the place Massah or Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:7)

This past week I had the occasion to visit my daughter Lucy, who is living in Washington, D.C. On Tuesday night we saw the play “King Lear,” which starred Stacy Keach as King Lear and which is a production of the Washington, D.C. Shakespeare Theatre.

Frederick Buechner has on more than one occasion noted that “King Lear” is Shakespeare’s greatest play – a “preachment” is what Buechner calls it. One cannot help but wonder if this story of this old king was not Shakespeare’s story as well – including his father’s fall from glory which he had witnessed as a boy, the death of his eleven year old son, and whatever wounds remained from his tangled relations with the beautiful young man, the Dark Lady, and the Rival Poet of the Sonnets.

One of the impressions I had in watching this play was the strange realization of the way that Shakespeare uses Biblical themes in this play, as he does in so many of his plays. In King Lear, as in St. Paul, it is the wise who are foolish and the foolish who are wise. It is also the blind who see clearly and the ones who should see most clearly who are, in fact, blind.

At the end of the play, with the stage riddled with the dead bodies of Lear’s three daughters and almost every one dear to Lear’s life, it is the Duke of Albany who utters the last lines of the play:

“The weight of these sad times we must obey
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

At the end of the play I had the feeling that for Shakespeare, there is something redeeming even in the sad times in which he lived and that grace triumphs even the most tragic elements of human life.

I.

This morning I have read for you one of the wilderness narratives that is a part of the Old Testament tradition. The wilderness wandering consisted of the forty years from the exodus in Egypt to the coming into the Promised Land. As Gerhard von Rad has observed, the wilderness years were viewed by Israel in two very distinct ways. In some places of the Old Testament the wilderness was the purest time in Israel's history. One way that the Old Testament views this period of wilderness wandering is very positive (Jeremiah 2:1-3). It was a time when Israel was closest to God and most dependent on God. God provided the food and water necessary to life. This view of the wilderness was almost like a "first love." It was pure and undefiled.

There is, however, another view of the wilderness wandering that is not positive. Deuteronomy speaks of the "great and terrible wilderness" (Deuteronomy 8:15-18), where life was threatened by drought, serpents and scorpions, and the lack of food. Jeremiah speaks of the wilderness in this manner when he calls the wilderness a land of "pits, of thirst and darkness, where none passes through and no one dwells." (Jeremiah 2: 6)

This story from Exodus represents this second view of the wilderness. In this case the people rebel against Moses and God because they do not have water to drink. As is so often the case, they accuse Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to die. They have forgotten they were slaves in Egypt and that God had delivered them at the Red Sea. All they can do now is lust for the "fleshpots of Egypt," preferring slavery and poverty to the possibility of freedom.

This story ends with the provision of water in the wilderness (see Numbers 20:1-13). Moses strikes the rock at Mt. Horeb and the people find water to drink. But the clue to this passage is found in the names that are given to this place: Massah, which signifies that Israel tested God, and Meribah, which means in Hebrew "quarreling."

This story is significant because it is a story about faith. God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The early chapters of Exodus tell us of Moses call to lead his people to freedom, the miraculous plagues, and finally Pharaoh's release of the people only to pursue them to the Red Sea, where once again God delivered them.

The wilderness stories are also filled with God's miraculous provisions. God provides quail and manna (bread) for the people (Exodus 16). He provides water as well.

But it is never enough. Israel cannot trust God to provide for her basic needs – despite the miraculous ways that God has done so. So Israel tests God.

And here is the crucial point. It is one thing to say that "We belong to God." It is something quite different to say that "God belongs to us," as if it was God's business to see to it that we are immune from every hazard of existence, time, accident, and environment.

What makes this passage so contemporary is that it is an echo of contemporary Christianity that cannot distinguish between what it means to belong to God and what it means that God belongs to us. As soon as something doesn't go our way, like Israel we complain "The Lord has deserted us."

So, the question this morning is the question of what it means to “test God.”

II.

One of the ways that we test God is when the church loses its sense of what it means to be the church. The Reformer John Calvin noted that the true church was to be found “where the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments were rightly administered.” Through the years First Presbyterian Church has emphasized the primary functions of the church as worship, Christian education, pastoral care, and outreach.

Throughout its existence the Presbyterian Church has had a remarkable impact not only on the city of Charlotte, but on the State of North Carolina and the United States government as well.

Today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) faces a very uncertain future. In June the office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) announced that our denomination lost 69,000 members in the year 2008. In the years since 1965 the membership of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has declined from 4.2 million members to 2.1 million members. Currently, we are losing between 50,000 to 100,000 members a year. It does not take a mathematical genius to determine what the implications of this membership loss will be unless the church finds a way to reverse this erosion.

Some years ago the Lily Foundation commissioned a study on what was called *The Presbyterian Pattern*. One of the chapters of that study was entitled “Reaching Out: A Study of Church Extension Activity in Mecklenburg Presbytery, North Carolina, 1920-1980.” In this study the author, Jerrold Lee Brooks, pointed out that from 1920 until 1965 the Presbytery was primarily concerned with evangelism and church extension (New Church Development). In the 1960’s and 1970’s the emphasis began to change. During this period there was more interest in social and political issues, including the Civil Rights Movement and the Viet Nam War.

Now, the church cannot be faulted for being concerned with issues as vital as civil rights and war. But Brooks observed that the church began to drift away from issues of evangelism and new church development. The result of this obsession with social and political issues and this neglect of evangelism and new church development is what continue to feed this decline and until we address this decline the future of this denomination is very bleak.

III.

Testing God is also something that affects each one of us on a personal level as well. The cry of Israel “Is the Lord among us or not?” is often our cry, especially when things are not going our way.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once pointed out that there are two very different kinds of faith. One is oriented to results and is marked by the little word “IF.” If everything goes the way I wish it to, if I succeed in my business, if my children do well, if my wishes are granted, then I will believe in God.

The other kind of faith is marked by words like “Even though,” “nevertheless,” and “but if not.” I want to succeed, but if not. I want my children to be successful, but nevertheless. I want to get well, but if not. God save me from this tragic possibility but if not ... I will believe and trust in God.

That is not a fair weather faith and it is found throughout the Old and New Testament.

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust him”

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou are with me.”

“Lord, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done.

Paul Tillich once preached a very powerful sermon on “The Providence of God.” In that sermon Tillich refers to a time after World War II that he spoke to a group of Jewish refugees who had escaped Hitler’s concentration camps. One of the members of that group told Dr. Tillich that he could not believe in God in a world in which eight million Jews had perished as a result of Nazi persecution. In that sermon Tillich noted some of the difficult things that happen to people: natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes, illness, loss of loved ones, great tragedies. Tillich notes that our belief in God’s providence is not some vague hope that with the help of God, everything will come to a good end. There are some things that come to a very bad end. Nor does it mean that there is divine planning by which everything is predetermined, as in an efficient machine. Rather, providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation that cannot be destroyed by any event. Providence means that the demonic and destructive forces within ourselves and our world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us, and that the bond that connects us with God through Jesus Christ cannot be broken.

The Christ witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal, it is also God’s providential working in history by which God transmutes good out of evil.

The human situation may become difficult, but there is always hope. The Apostle Paul reminds us that “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (II Corinthians 4:8-9)

The stories of the Wilderness wanderings are powerful reminders to us of the power of God to provide for us the necessities of our lives. They remind us as well that it is one thing to say that “We are his” and quite something else to say of God that “He is ours.”

God provides for his people, but always on God’s terms and not on ours. For that reason we are called to trust God’s love and goodness and to have confidence in his power to provide for us all that we need.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was once imprisoned in Bedford, England for his religious views. He was told that if he recanted his views, he would be set free.

Bunyan replied, "I will jump off the ladder into eternity blindfolded. Sink or swim, come heaven or hell, Lord Jesus, if Thou will, catch me. But if not, I will ever venture in your name."

May God grant us his grace that we will not test him, but that we will ever venture in his name. Amen.