



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## *The Desert's Test*

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Long before I married a golfer, I learned that golf exemplified the difference between competition and testing. Tennis is competition – you have an opponent across the net that is doing his best to get the ball by you and you are doing the same. You each try to outwit and outwit, as well as wear down the other. How well you compete can make the difference. But with golf, you may be trying to beat someone, but you have little impact on how well they play, and as any professional would tell you, your focus is to play the course, not your opponent. Golf is a never ending exercise in testing yourself, physically and mentally, against a designed challenge, and while I don't play golf, I think it's a really good metaphor for life. Life is all about accepting the challenges in front of us and giving it our best shot.

That modern metaphor leads us into our second week of Lent and the continuing conversation about testing ourselves in the desert, and in particular the wisdom we have been hearing from John Moses' book, *The Desert; A Lenten Anthology*. Moses says that, "The desert is a place of truth, and that implies that it is invariably experienced as a place of testing. The desert exposes our vulnerabilities. It brings to the surface the fears that are buried deep within ourselves." The Christian journey into the desert requires courage and endurance, but it's only way to the maturing of the soul.

The Bible is full of stories of testing; people have the opportunity to choose from among their options. Adam and Eve had their moment and found themselves looking for a new home. Abraham's story is one of perpetual testing, sometimes he chooses well, sometimes not. The story from Genesis this morning, the calling of Abram to leave his home and all that he knows to go to some unfamiliar place is a test indeed. It is one that many of us recognize. Every college freshman is faced with a similar situation – leave your home, the shelter of your parent's presence and support, the friends that you've known, and make a new life for yourself. This move always comes with promise – not necessarily to become a great nation, as in the case of Abram, but to become great at something so as to be a blessing to the world. How each one responds to this new place and freedom is their story of testing.

In our Gospel, Nicodemus, the Pharisee who visits Jesus at night, in the dark, is also tested; he has choices to make about what he will believe. Jesus' signs and deeds of power provide ample reason to follow his teachings, but relying on signs is not sufficient for true faith.



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Jesus says that to truly see what is in our midst, the kingdom of God; one must be born *anōthen*, the Greek word that is used here. I hear in that the idea of starting anew from a different perspective, a spiritual one, no longer encumbered by a more limited human point of view. But all Nicodemus hears is the literal interpretation of the word *anōthen*, which means either *again* or from *above*. He is confused by the situation and from the answer he gives to this test, it is easy to see that he is not grasping the spiritual reality that one can indeed be born again, from above—in other words, to have one's mind and heart rearranged by God's vision.

The best thing about Nicodemus' story is that it isn't the end of the story. As often happens in life, if we don't do so well on an important test in the desert, we get another chance. Nicodemus reappears later in the Gospel story with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus' crucified body and seems to engage his faith and spiritual understanding a little better the second time around. True testing is not a pop-quiz, it is a process of growth, sometimes incremental, involving many different kinds of tests, and in the end Nicodemus shows that he is committed to his journey through the desert of unbelief, literalism and small vision. That he will prevail is destined from the beginning, because he is open to something more.

All of us face many tests and trying times throughout our years. It's actually what a life dedicated to the pursuit of emotional and spiritual maturity is about. Growth comes through our response to our tests and there are many kinds of tests. Some are clearly defined in our growing up – tests at school, try-outs for activities, applications to the school of our choice. With these we have a clear measure, either we pass or do well and get what we want or we don't. That's the easy part to gauge. With each of these experiences, however, we face another test – how do we respond to the outcomes, especially if those outcomes are not what we would consciously choose? That takes a different kind of measuring device to know how we do on these tests. Do we interpret our success or lack thereof as an indication of who we are? How much power over our sense of well-being does success or failure hold on us? Do they encourage or discourage us; challenge us or shut us down? You may not have learned great things from your SATs, but you can learn a lot if you examine what went on in your being, your heart, soul and body around the taking of it. Tests can bring out our insecurities and fears and by doing so they give us the opportunity to become something more than we thought we could be.

There are tests that we go looking for – like running a marathon when just finishing can be a major triumph. Peter's love of golf falls into this place—he says he loves the challenge of always trying to get better. How great the challenges we pursue are can tell us a lot. How hard are we willing to push ourselves; are we prepared to be humbled as a result? Some people like to push themselves harder than others, but there is no right answer here—the choices we make on how to challenge ourselves should be ours alone to make.



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Usually testing in the desert, though, involves challenges we might not choose for ourselves. For these tests, we need both a sound philosophy and a grounded prayer life. Our prayers, like the last one Jesus himself uttered on the Cross, are not that the trial, struggle, or difficulty be taken from us but that we be given the strength and courage to persevere. When we do that, we know that in all our tests in the desert God will be with us, that we will learn something valuable in the process, and that we will gain a more spiritual perspective on life. When we persevere, we begin to see the wisdom of that famous Arab proverb—whatever doesn't kill you will only make you stronger.

There is one more great benefit that comes with being tested in the desert. In practicing solitude, we allow ourselves to become more aware of who we are and what we are doing there. In being tested, we allow ourselves to open up to the power of God's Grace, which gives us strength to meet the challenges of life. As always, Jesus has gone before us, showing us the way and loving us the most when we face the time of trial. He is God's Son, listen to him and trust him.

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