

## Testing or Trusting?

2008-02-10-Year A-Lent 1

Who here has ever seen a quark? Anybody? Anybody?

Well, it's good that no one has. I don't want to get into a lot of detail about quarks, mostly because a sentence or two and I will be thrashing about in the deep end. But what I do know is that even with the most advanced scientific equipment, they haven't been seen. But scientists believe that they exist because their existence makes other matters of physical existence true. Scientists trust that they exist, even though they can't actually see them. John Polkinghorne says "Quarks are an unseen reality."

I learned this in an interview I heard with him. Polkinghorne is both a quantum physicist and an Anglican priest and about quarks and quantum theory, he says:

"Invented to deal with atoms, quantum theory now makes successful predication about the behavior of quarks, which are at least a hundred million times smaller than atoms. At the level of explanation and prediction, it is, perhaps, the most successful scientific theory ever. Yet we do not understand it."

In the interview he also talked about the difference between testing and trusting. As a scientist he understands the need of testing to discern truths. But testing only works to a certain point. Quarks have been proven in all kinds of mathematical and scientific ways, but they haven't been seen or isolated in a lab. At a certain point, scientists move from testing to trusting, based on the information available to them.

Polkinghorne says that the same move is critical in much of human experience. At a certain point we all must move from testing to trusting. As an example he uses a friendship between two people. If one friend is always setting little traps to assess the

friendship, constantly skeptical of motivations, or checking in for assurance that the friendship still exists, the friendship will be destroyed. At a point, each person has to allow testing to give way to trusting, so that they can live in the friendship. In the end, healthy life-giving relationships are built on trust and testing is set aside.

The reading from Genesis is a familiar one to us. So familiar, in fact, that we sometimes fail to hear it properly. For instance, without looking at your bulletin, what was it that the woman ate?

We think apple, but all scripture tells us is that it was fruit, and unless this garden was in Washington State or Michigan, it's less likely that it was an apple.

God had put the man and the woman in this garden to till it and keep it. And God gave them freedom over everything in the garden but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And everything was going fine until the serpent arrived with his test of God. With the serpent's challenge, the woman sees everything differently, she moves from a place of trusting God, to testing God and trusting instead her own judgement. Instead of listening to God, she listens to a word that is not from God—she considers alternatives to God. Suddenly, to her, the tree looks good for food and is a delight to the eyes. It is to be desired to make one wise. To make one “like God.” The woman loses sight of God's instructions in her desire, and her need to make something other of herself than God has made of her. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, using this story as a reference, “Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.” In moving from trust of God to trust in her own judgement—her desire to be “like God”, the woman forgets God.

We hear the gospel lesson in counterpoint to this story of Adam and Eve in the garden with the serpent. And it is in that contrast that we find our own path to faithful discipleship.

Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, and he goes willingly. As with every part of this journey, Jesus obeys God's call for him. Jesus trusts in God's direction.

In the first text, the devil goes right to the heart of an immediate need for Jesus, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus is hungry, after all, really hungry. He hasn't eaten for 40 days or for 40 nights either. The temptation to do what the devil suggests must be great. Not only because he's hungry, but because the devil is challenging his authority. You could imagine if that were us we might say to the devil, "You talkin' to me?"

But of course, that's not Jesus' response. He doesn't take the bait, either by succumbing to his physical needs or by falling for the challenge to his authority. He knows where appropriate authority rests and that's clear in his response to the devil, "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In this time of testing, Jesus turns to God's word and knows that is where his strength and authority lie.

So the devil tries again, taking him to the pinnacle of the temple and again calling him to prove that he is indeed the Son of God by throwing himself from the temple and counting on God's angels to catch him. The devil dares Jesus to test God and indeed to test his own commitment to God's call for him. I can hear the devil saying, "dare ya, double dare, ya, cluck, cluck, cluck...)

But Jesus again is confident in God and he puts his trust in God, and nothing will sway him or turn him from that trust. He has nothing to prove to the devil. In this way, Jesus sets a new standard, different from that of Adam and Eve, and different from that of the Israelites in the wilderness after God has brought them out of Egypt. Because that is the reference that Jesus is making here. In the desert, the Israelites were always grumbling, saying, “Man, it would have been better if we’d stayed back in Egypt, at least then we’d have food and drink.” And they tested God, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not.” Thinking that indeed if he were, he’d show up with water. But God says, “Don’t test me.” And Jesus, put to the test himself, by the Devil, doesn’t test God, he trusts him, and that is a mark of his faithfulness.

But the devil’s not ready to give up. He takes one more shot at Jesus—taking him to a high place where they can see the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And he says, “I can make all this yours, all you gotta do is fall at my feet and worship me.” “No big deal, just a little bit of worship for all of this!” A classic if-then conditional statement.

The devil is challenging Jesus to choose who he will follow, whose reign he stands under. Jesus again has no doubts, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” And you can imagine him saying, “I don’t need your stinkin’ if/then conditions” because he knows that God’s reign is a because/therefore promise, not a condition. Because God loves Jesus, and indeed, all of us, therefore God’s reign is without condition and the promise is free to all.

Then Jesus sends the devil packing, and if there were any doubt about who come out on top after this wilderness duel, that proves it. The devil goes and the angels come and wait on Jesus.

So let's think about Jesus' responses and what they tell us about him.

Jesus is persistent in understanding himself in terms of God's grace. God's grace expressed by God's unconditional love has ruling authority in Jesus' life. God's love claims him and identifies him. God's love tells him who he is. And Jesus knows that he stands under that love, whatever the circumstances are that he finds himself in.

Jesus exhibits a patient trust, refusing to force God's hand, refusing to press God to show his love when called to for reasons that having nothing to do with God, from demands that are anything but God-like.

And finally, Jesus shows undivided commitment to God. He rejects any alternatives to God and all that God promises. What God offers is all that Jesus needs, it's everything, in fact, and Jesus knows that, Jesus shows that and he relies on it.

As we look at Jesus experience in the wilderness, being tempted by God, we see a model for faithful discipleship that we can hold on to and one that, because of Jesus and all that Jesus has done for us, we have the strength to live, and more importantly, the promise of forgiveness so that when we lose sight of it, we can return to the promise, again and again.

We can stand persistently in the knowledge of God's grace for us. Knowing that we have the promise of God's grace, we can return to God each day, we can call on God for strength and we can share God's love with others and by doing that be assured of the hope that is Jesus Christ.

We can live in patient trust, refusing to force God's hand, refusing to test God. Refusing to insist that if God really loved us we'd feel a certain way, or act a certain way, or experience life a certain way. The experience of our faith journey is one lived out

through all the days of our lives, and many of those days, and weeks and months call for patience, call for a patient trust, call for putting things in God's hands and recognizing that they are better off their than in our own. Call to moving from testing to trusting and living into our relationship with God.

And finally, faithful discipleship calls for undivided commitment that rejects alternatives to God. Alternatives like individualism, or consumerism, or nationalism, or healthy skepticism or any of those other -isms that seem to offer something we think we aren't getting from God. God the one who is made real for us in Jesus and in whom we are made whole.

So, let's review. Living as faithful disciples:

We show persistence in standing under God's grace

We have patient trust, over all the days of our lives

And we demonstrate undivided commitment to God and God's reign.

And when we struggle to do these things we ask God's forgiveness and turn to God again.

Jesus turned away the devil by faithfully trusting God, and because of Jesus, we can to.