

June 27, 2021 St. Peter Lutheran Church, Doss, TX Testing 1-2-3

Lamentations 3:22 *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. 24 "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." 25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27 It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. 28 Let him sit alone in silence when he has laid it on him; 29 let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope; 30 let him give his cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. 31 For the Lord will not cast off forever, 32 but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; 33 for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men.*

Life has been called a test, but not one we are left to flounder in. It's our choice, however, to make God first in our lives. God doesn't make us faithful, but helps us come through the tests if we let Him. Temptations come to all of us. 1 Corinthians 10 (13) from the Message paraphrase says: **No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.**

I have this letter of sorts from a middle-aged woman who gave me permission to share it. She spoke of why people are tempted to get addicted to things based on her experience and what she learned from it.

Dear Friends,

I've been writing a lot lately in a book about Seeking Enlightenment One Hat at a Time. As you remember Lent, I wanted to tell you about how addiction tried to steal away my life and almost did.

When my sister and I were in our teens, we read a tabloid article that listed indicators by which one could identify aliens walking the earth in the guise of humans, and couldn't help but note that our mother exhibited eight out of ten of the telltale signs. We could never get her to admit to extraterrestrial ancestry but often wondered if it accounted for the fact that we never felt quite at one with our fellow human beings. As we walked and wandered in wider circles, it became evident that our very "otherness" was what we shared with the human race, this sense of "not quite-ness."

The more I observed, the clearer it seemed to me that human beings—and I now include myself in that group—are apparently born with, or soon develop, an emptiness, a vacuum, a dead zone at the core of their being.

For me, this emptiness was felt in the body as well as within the mind. It manifested as a hollow feeling—an ache without pain—just behind my sternum, a drain through which contentment, satisfaction, and inner peace leaked away.

As far as I'm concerned, this dead zone is at the root of addiction. I've been a creature prone to addiction my entire life. As my friend Mari puts it:

"I've had to give up more things than most people have ever tried." Love, chocolate, cats, cigarettes, alcohol, people, places, things, animals, vegetables, minerals: the only one that's never plagued me is addiction to work, and I suspect that has only been avoided because of my couch addiction. If something makes me feel better, dulls that spectral ache for a moment, lends a sense of belonging, then I wanted a whole lot of it and I wanted it often. Unfortunately, these various efforts to stop the leak were temporary at best and had side effects worse than the inner pain.

I'd heard religious folk refer to this hollow feeling as a "God-sized hole" and use it to explain why every culture throughout history has needed to invent, discover, or appropriate gods. I suffered the hole and I admired the reasoning but remained unmoved. The religious types I noticed just used the image of a god like I used my various substances; merely another addiction with which to stop up the drain and one that worked no better and had just as many unpleasant side effects as booze or drugs.

However, close to thirty years of watching everything from caffeine to relationships disappear down this internal hole, I decided, what the heck, I'd tried everything else, why not give God a go? At least it was legal and nonfattening.

Once I entered into the fold, so to speak, I would occasionally run across someone who seemed to truly know God, and I realized that religion, like a bad toupee or a face-lift gone sour, is only obvious when it's done badly. For those doing it right, there seemed to be a continuity of peace and strength that was visible only in kindness and tolerance, in the best sense of the word shown toward others and toward themselves.

Bit by bit it dawned on me that this mental/spiritual/imaginary void within was not a hole that required stopping up but a sort of food tank, needing to be constantly refilled to power my life. Looking upon this hollowness as a hunger for sustaining power rather than a drain down which the good things went, I began to take note of the kinds of fuel I was in the habit of pouring in. Considering the garbage I dumped there, it made sense that my life force ran erratically, with jerks, racing, sudden stops, and a good deal of foul black smoke.

In realizing I fueled my spiritual self with garbage at best and poison at worst, I was afforded the barest glimmer of inkling that better fuel was available.

With God, (though He may be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent), one size does not fit all. Each of us can only perceive Him with the senses we've been given, with our human hearts and minds and experiences. Surely, I thought, if He wanted to be heard and seen, He would make Himself known to

each person in a form that individual could understand, be it a many-armed diva or a white male patriarch in flowing beard and nightgown.

I set out to find what sort of God would work with my idiosyncratic soul.

Do you remember from my last letter how I began that journey? I'd run into a major crisis in my life, a major wall that I didn't understand. As I tried to make sense of it, I went out walking alone at dusk. It was Christmas time, a time when past joys became present aches. Three blocks from my apartment, I came to a church. Though raised agnostic and become atheist in conversation if not in desperation, I stopped in the snow and gazed up at the church window. Like in a movie, I would try the door; it would be locked; then tragically, abandoned by God and humanity, I would go to my lonely bed. My plot was unexpectedly thickened; the doors were open. Inside were four women, seated not in the pews but on the carpet before the steps leading to altar. Most of the light came from candles. It was churchy as heck. I felt self-conscious, superior, intrusive, unwanted, and out of place. I turned to slink away. Those Christian women welcomed men and I was suddenly stuck in a reality not of my own making. As part of a prayer service, a 3 ft by two-foot cross was lying on the steps and each woman laid hands on it and silently poured their pain into the forgiving hands of Jesus. When my turn came, I poured mine into dead wood. As soon as it was over, I made my escape. Oddly though, I felt better, lighter, but basically unchanged. That following Sunday, I put on my good clothes and walked to church. It turned out to be St. Anthony Episcopal. I was invited to Wednesday Bible study class. There was a free meal and people to eat with. I began to go. Three months later, I wanted to be confirmed though I knew I did not believe and was not a Christian. I went to the priest and told him this but that I wanted to be confirmed. I asked if this was OK. He said it was. Now I go to church. I wear a nice dress. I kneel. Now I sing praises as well as lamentations and my prayers of gratitude outnumber my confessions. You remember? What did I do during that time?

I worked to open myself, clean away the junk, the obsessions, the metaphorical painkillers that shored up my ego, and let the hollow place stand empty. I practiced breathing in and out. I tolerated the emptiness, resisted the urge to cram it full of whatever was handy. After some years, my heart was as often the residence of silence as of smoke and clamor. Acceptance, awareness, stillness, a sense of something greater than myself crept in. A comforting knowledge of belonging arose. Though I hadn't experienced it before, it was as familiar as the road leading home. By small increments, my life began to run more smoothly. I now enjoy not merely moments of peace but, when I'm lucky, entire days.

I would like to say that, upon understanding fully this concept of clean, environmentally friendly food for the soul, I attained permanent

enlightenment, total serenity. But the old aching loneliness returns now and again and, with it, the knee-jerk desire to dull the sensation with some moderately toxic substance. Still, I am on the winning side. These times are fewer and farther between, the duration shorter, and the collateral damage remarkably small.

I hope to be in touch with you again as you seek His face. I'll be doing the same.

Your Friend,
Nevada

Paul warns you and me: *if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* (1 Cor.10:12)

Nevada has drifted from her faith since she wrote this. Has that ever happened to you? Do you have an aching loneliness in the center of your being? The writer of Lamentations knows that life is hard, his people taken into captivity by the Babylonians. But our text reminds us that *25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.* When things get difficult, think of the words of a recording engineer named David Shepherd from Alberta. He was taught canoeing and a technique on how to maintain a straight course. He said, "Look for a reference point on the shore, the large stone or a tall pine. Every few strokes look to see how you're faring in relation to this point. Everything on the water is being influenced by a variety of factors. Something fixed on land isn't. Many factors in life, some inherent in the places we live or work, nudge us one way or another. If we aren't paying attention, it doesn't take long to drift off course, going places we were never meant to go. But if we maintain regular checks with God, looking up to see how our attitudes and actions are matching up, we can catch small alterations in course before they become major detours." (PK, Jan.29, 04) He concluded like Nevada did that God is our solid point. We can make it through the tests of life with God's gracious help, keeping our eyes on Him and filling that inner space with Him. In conclusion, think about the Message paraphrase of our text which says: 22-24 God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over). He's all I've got left. 25-27 God proves to be good to the man who passionately waits, to the woman who diligently seeks. It's a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from God. It's a good thing when you're young to stick it out through the hard times. 28-30 When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence. Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions: Wait for hope to appear. Don't run from trouble. Take it full-face. the "worst" is never the worst. 31-33 Why? Because the Master won't ever walk out and fail to return. If he works severely, sthrowing roadblocks in the way: Always, remember that God is faithful and loves us dearly and wants us to be faithful and get to know Him better. Will you pray for that?! Amen