

Do you remember the game we played as children - at carnivals or birthday parties, where we fished for prizes? We couldn't see what we were fishing for, hence the name Mystery Fishing Game! We were given a little fishing pole or a stick with a string on the end and attached was a clothespin. What you fished for was hidden behind a curtain or a box.

The attendant would help us cast our line behind the curtain or box and into the so-called water. Then somebody, hidden from view, would attach a small gift or bag of surprises with favors and candy. Then they tug on the line, as if a fish has been hooked. It was so exciting for us as young kids to do this. Then we'd pull up the line and retrieve our prize.

It's a simple and fun game that kids love... except... when you may not get what **you expected**. **Disappointed**, a child moves on to the next game, but it is hard to get over that disappointment! It may be something you always remember.

Life is a lot like that game. Life is full of the **unexpected** and we, live with it, resent it, or bury it inside through behaviors we thought we'd never do.

I've been having forgetful moments since moving to Green Valley. It's not what **I expected**. I've been told to call them Green Valley moments - don't worry about them. But I do! They're really **EMBARRASSING MOMENTS!** We've all had them. Forget where you placed your car keys, or where you parked your car?

A friend of mine kept asking where her cell phone was as she talked to a person. And as she got more and more alarmed that she had forgotten her cell phone somewhere, the friend on the end of the line, said, “Aren’t you talking on your cell phone?” Yes, we can live through embarrassing moments but, truth be told, we don’t want everybody to know about them, do we...? We can also live through life when things don’t turn out as we expected, but, if we’re honest, the **unexpected** events in life can weigh us down.

Today’s scripture is sandwiched between Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his ministry, where he calls his first disciples. Jesus is led into the wilderness, and I would add, **unexpectedly**. He’s ready to serve God, but instead he’s **tested**, a more accurate translation than **tempted**. The Spirit leads him into this vast wilderness - 35 miles by 15 miles - known as Jeshimmon (yesh-ee-mone) in Hebrew, meaning wasteland or devastation. It is a large area of yellow sand, craggy rock outcroppings, blistering heat that makes our Valley look like paradise. Here Jesus is alone, face-to-face with Satan, and he’s **tested** three times.

I believe we can relate to this story because often in our struggles, the devastating events in our lives, we feel alone. When the **unexpected** hits us with its full force we may even prefer to be alone to think through our thoughts and feelings coming to terms with what’s happening to us and within us.

In the first test, Jesus is asked to turn the stones into bread; take on the impossible and make it a reality. Jesus replies, “People do not live by bread alone but by every word from God.” And the second test, from the top of the Temple, Jesus is told to throw himself down and let God command the angels to take him up and keep him from harm. Jesus says, “Do not put the Lord God to the test.”

Jesus is in a struggle against Satan. Jesus heard at his baptism, “You are my beloved.” Satan is testing Jesus, “If you are the Beloved, the Son of God, then do these things....” Satan is saying; prove your identity to me.

We too are the beloved of God and we are tested in our life to prove our identity as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus responds to his testing by faithfulness. How are we doing?

Jesus responds to his testing by staying focused on God. How about us?

Jesus responds to his testing by being totally dependent upon God. And us?

Where have you been tested by God? What was your response?

My focus today though is on the third test. These verses are about having it all or a big portion of it anyway. And if we have a lot, we most likely are **tested / tempted** to treat God as less than God. We compromise our lives with the ways of the world – it is seductive – and it is very real!

We may not see ourselves in a face-to-face struggle with Satan – but we know life’s struggles. We know the allure and seduction of worldly possessions

and temptations and when we think God isn't here for us – we feel abandoned, alone and forsaken - we forget God's promise that he will never leave us or forsake us!

The third test for Jesus focuses directly on his mission to save the world. Mission! Today is Mission Sunday at VPC. In the social hall after worship we invite you to visit the many and varied mission agencies we support. And they need support; they need volunteers for the work they do. God may be calling you to serve Him by serving through one of these mission agencies. Please take some time to go by and see what they do.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, the disenfranchised, and the forsaken, reconciling them to God. Mission work is a way for us to also serve a lost and broken world. In her devotion to the Stephen Ministers last Friday, Leona Aardema, used a bestselling book by Max Lucado, titled *Out Live Your Life*. She talked about how we can do many things that **succeed us**, that *out live our lives*, that continue to help others in need because we were there to help someone in need who also passed it on. We might call that a legacy, whether it's financial or personal time and compassion given. It makes a difference in the world Jesus came to save.

But Satan says to Jesus, "All these kingdoms of the world I will give you if you only will bow down and worship me." The Devil is saying you don't need to

go to the Cross to have all this before you. You don't need to save the world; I'll give it to you.

Our culture says the same thing, "You can have anything you want, if you just try hard enough; if you study enough; if you do it like this or like that.

Our culture says, "You don't need to carry your own cross. You don't need to be faithful to live a good life! You don't need to go to church to have a wonderful life! You don't need to pray! You don't need a relationship with God.

America! Take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance. We don't need God anymore. We'll still be strong!

America! Take God out of our courtrooms. We'll still be a just and free society.

America! Take God out of schools. We'll still teach our children the right morals for healthy living.

America! Take God out of our lives and we will all just be fine!!!!

THAT'S A TEST!!! WE'RE BEING TESTED!!!

It's seductive and very tempting isn't it? We are tested daily to minimize or reject God altogether; to forget that we're made in the image of God. Satan was doing the same with Jesus. Don't worry about being God's Son, or being his Beloved; give up going to the Cross; and worship something else.

No-one can take God out of your heart – unless you allow it.

Jesus said, “Away with you Satan. It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”

Jesus clearly stays focused on God. This, I believe, is exactly what Pastor Larry was talking about last week. We have one ultimate focus, to “Worship the Lord and serve Him only.”

Christ came to serve God’s kingdom. And that included going to the Cross for us, so that our lives can be transformed and renewed. **We can out live our lives**, by serving God, by being in mission. Mission legacy is not ours. It’s God’s!

I believe that when we serve God, we more readily see the needs of others - then we start to serve those crying out for justice, for food, for peace, for a helping hand. This is mission, focused first on God and then God leads us to serve his people.

Jesus banishes Satan. Then he’s attended to by angels. He really isn’t alone. You and I are never truly alone. God and his angels attend to us daily.

I know that some may not believe in angels. But I also know there are times when people have no idea how they got through a crisis other than with God and his attendants.

I’ll close with this story. When I was a chaplain at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, I was visiting with a young boy around 12 years of age. He was scheduled to have ear surgery the next day. He was sitting with his family, mother,

aunts and uncles, grandparents, siblings and cousins all around him in a waiting area. He had a huge bandage over his ear. I sat on the other side so he could hear me. I spoke to him but he was shy or afraid. His family answered my questions and told me about his situation.

After visiting I prayed with this young boy and his family, mostly in Spanish. At the end I gave him a prayer card that the hospital provided the chaplains for Catholic patients. When he saw the card he began to cry uncontrollably. I didn't know why. He still hadn't spoken to me, but his aunt told me, you gave him his guardian angel, Michael. He told us, now he knows he will be healed, that God is with him.

We serve God by serving others – giving them our hands to hold, our ears to listen, and our hearts that express compassion, love and mercy. And God knows. Let us stay focused on God and serve Him only. Amen.