

## Lent 1C

### Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

Every year, I think to myself, "How can I make this Lent different?" In other words, it's important to acknowledge these next 40 days in a way that reminds me of the journeys of Jesus, his teachings, his activities, and his intentional walk to the cross. Long ago, I gave up giving up stuff. That seemed like New Year's resolutions that, almost by definition, do not last. And the purpose for giving stuff up didn't seem to have much to do with my spiritual life or with growing closer to God.

One of the things I said on Ash Wednesday is that whatever we do – get ashes, pray, give alms (certainly a softer word than money), or do other acts that mark Lent – whatever we do, is ultimately between each one of us and God. Certainly our Lenten efforts can affect other in small or large ways, but ultimately they affect our relationship with God. Whatever we do, whenever we do it, comes out of our faith – or our developing faith in our creator. And we do it because we are on a journey of faith, just as Jesus was on his own journey of faith.

We are tempted daily to do things that don't fit with our efforts to live a Christian way of life. Jesus was tempted daily – and certainly in this passage from Luke, he was tempted strongly and intentionally by the angel who fell from God's grace. But Jesus' answers were pretty basic to our faith: "One does not live by bread alone"; "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him;" and "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Let me suggest a relationship between the first test and the reading from Deuteronomy.

Jesus could have turned the stone into bread, and he would be fed. But his life was not only about keeping himself fed, it was about feeding others as well. In Deuteronomy, we hear of the necessity of giving one tenth of the harvest to the temple to feed those in need. The food that comes to the temple is the result of the bounty of those who are able to produce from their land --- or their gifts – or their skills and talents. It is shared with others and there is great celebration after the gathering because all have participated and the needs of the community are met.

This would have made a great reading for a stewardship sermon but we're beyond that season, thankfully. We have such a strong aversion when it comes to talking about sharing the first fruits of the harvest of our work through the place that the Lord your God has chosen as a dwelling place for his name.

Most of us don't really want to talk about it and most of us don't share our first fruits but rather share what's left after we take what we think we need and want. I think sometimes we don't want to acknowledge that if it weren't for God, we would not have the gift and skills that have brought us to a place of financial comfort. We like to think we've done everything on our own and are not beholden to anyone, not even God. Or we make a cursory acknowledgement that has little effect, if any, on our giving patterns.

Since the topic has been opened in the readings from Deuteronomy and Luke, I'm going to offer a rather mundane word about this topic that we think we hear too much about in church. We know that our pledge income has decreased by about 10% each year since 2009. This year, with a surge in new members and with a handful of continuing members who have not yet renewed their pledges, it would be very easy – with their pledge – for the 2013 pledge year to come in around \$305,000 to \$310,000; that is, a 5-1/2% increase over 2013 budgeted pledges. That's how close we are to turning our individual giving downswing into a healthy upswing.

Jesus didn't just make bread for his own needs alone – he belonged to a community and that's where he shared his abilities and bounties. The Hebrews gave thanks for all that God had given them by sharing with those who had less through the work of the place God had chosen as a dwelling place for his name.

We are tempted as Jesus was to make and keep what we have for our own benefit. We can make the choice he and the Hebrews made by sharing our first fruits through the house of God.

Then there's that second test – worship Satan, and the riches of the world will be yours. That seemed like a nice, short-term bit of gratification. And there are many who take the offer. Worship the ways of the world, worship the treasures of the world, worship the values and status of the world, and it will all be ours. Or if we at least to worship those things, we'll have a good life and not have to worry about anyone else but ourselves and our

families. Jesus said "No. I worship and serve only God." Period. So the things, the temptations of the secular world take second place to the expectations that God has of us: to love God and love our neighbor. Everything else we do, everything else for which we strive, flows from those two expectations. But we must have faith; we must trust in the Lord to work with us to provide fruits from our labors. We don't do it alone and we don't depend on other false Gods or other temptations. Satan was offering Jesus everything if he would just hand over his soul to Satan and Satan would take care of him. So if we depend on the things of the world, depend on other people, depend on ourselves, will we no longer worry and feel safe in our lives?

And finally, the last temptation. "Throw yourself off the cliff and call on the angels of God to save you." What does Jesus respond? "Oh, please. Don't even put God to a test. Don't even." If I am foolish enough to throw myself off a cliff or the top of a tall building, I fully expect to die an ugly and messy death. God doesn't have to prove anything to me if I have faith in God. If I have faith in God and if I know that God was walked with me through my life, then I don't need to test God. That's not what our relationship is about. Have you tried testing your best friend or your partner to make sure they're faithful to you? I hope you don't have that kind of relationship. So we give God at least the same credit for living into a faithful relationship and commitment with each one of us.

There are many things we are called to during this period of Lent – self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and reading and meditating on God's holy Word. We learn from this story of the temptations of Jesus that we are called to share what we have through the place God has chosen as a dwelling place for his name; we are to worship only God and not those things temporal or of Satan; and we are called to trust God and have no need to test God.

Share. Worship. Trust.

Lent is the time that we are called to re-examine our lives, to shift them back a place where God is at the center, and to amend those things in our lives that keep us turned away from God. Daily reading and meditation is a very good place to begin. Deepening our relationship with God and one another through the offerings of this community is another thing we can do to shift our faces toward God. Examination of our life in this community and the manner in which we participate in it and support it gives us context for our faith journey and keeps us in relationship with one another and God. And in self-examination and the rite of reconciliation we can acknowledge the place of God in our lives and shift back to a place where our lives are God-centric rather than egocentric.

We can still give up stuff if we want – it's called self denial. But make it has to do with strengthen or deepening your spiritual and faith life. That's the point of any Lenten discipline. We might even amend our lives in a way that continues even after Easter. That's an okay thing to do – we don't need to stop amending at midnight on Easter morning.

This time of Lent promotes spiritual growth and a deeper relationship with God. It brings to us lives that are less fragmented, more centered, and increasingly peaceful. All it takes is a little intentionality and a little commitment on our part. It's all good.

Amen.

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February 17, 2013