

“Remember What God Has Done”

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The Lenten season has begun. I don't know if you have any Lenten practices. As a child, I was very interested in Lenten practices – particularly giving up chocolate in anticipation of the massive, massive amounts of candy that my parents got me on Easter Sunday. It was really very amazing [laughter]; but I learned later in life, this isn't what every other family did, so I learned to be a little quiet about how many pounds of chocolate and candy they gave us.

At some point, I learned the tradition that Lent is 40 days, plus Sundays. So, if you are doing a 40-day fast, that excludes the Sundays, which means that whatever it is that you are giving up, you can have it on Sunday [laughter], if you wish. I didn't feel that was helpful, actually. It kind of undid the practice I was doing. But if that interests you, you can certainly follow that practice. If you are giving something up, you can do it for 40 days, and then set aside the Lord's Day, when we come to celebrate the Resurrection.

But we look at this passage that is the archetype of the Lenten experience. This is the first Sunday of Lent and we see Jesus going into the desert. And scholars have debated what the purpose of this was. It is not clear at the outset. Luke, as he is describing it, doesn't explain why this is happening – he just says it is.

He describes the story just previous to this, as the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, and the Spirit of God coming down, and the voice of God speaking, “This is my Son, of whom I'm well pleased.”

Then, Luke records that he was full of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit led him out into the desert. and he did not eat for 40 days. It's said that he led him out to be tempted by Satan. It doesn't describe how he was tempted throughout those 40 days. There are Christians and traditions of fasting or of solitude.

I studied and appreciated the stories of the desert fathers, who would go out into the wilderness and live in solitude. One of my favorite writers, Henry Nouwen, described what that experience is like, spiritually. It's like the crucible of solitude. When you go out on your own, you don't have this interaction with other people. He said that when we have people around us, we can talk to them and try to shape their impression of us by what we say, and we get that reflected back to us, and in that way we can kind of shape what we look like and who we are – but without other people around, we are left with nothing but ourselves. And, in this crucible, we are forced to face who we are. It doesn't describe what that was like for Jesus, but it is a powerful experience of focusing and considering.

So Jesus went into the desert, I believe in preparation for the ministry that he was going to be doing. As he was there, at the end of this time, Satan came and tempted him.

I was talking with the junior-highers a couple of weeks back, as we were looking at this story, and this first temptation is a little bit strange, just looking at the story: He is hungry. The devil says to him, “If you are the son of God, then command these stones to become

bread.” And, a reasonable question to ask is: What’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with turning stones into bread? It’s not sinful to eat bread. It’s not obvious what the temptation is here.

The clue really comes from Jesus’ answer, and again, Jesus’ answer isn’t telling the whole story, as Luke is recording it. Jesus answers in Luke, “You have heard it said, ‘Man does not live by bread alone,’” and then it stops.

You may be familiar with the idea of a call back. If I were to give you some lines from a movie, I could say the movie and you could see the whole scene, or maybe even the whole movie. I’m trying to think of some famous lines. We could go to [Arnold] Schwarzenegger’s line: “I’ll be back.” [It] doesn’t work very well, because it was in so many of his movies – that really doesn’t get you to a scene.

One of the favorite movies of my childhood was known by the line – by the question: “What is the air velocity of an unladen swallow?” [For] those of you who aren’t laughing at that [it’s] because you didn’t grow up in a little group of computer nerds who loved Monty Python. [Laughter.] Maybe you would recognize another one: “You can’t handle the truth!” that whole scene is going to come back.

This passage that he is sighting is more familiar than that. It was this core passage of piety that was reflected almost daily in the Jewish life. This is the passage that follows the Shema which – you may have heard of – is something that was commanded in Scripture for the faithful to do every morning and every evening: “Hear, O Israel: Sh'ma Yisrael, the Lord your God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The Lord your God is one.” And then this passage followed it – he quoted Luke, quotes just this little verse: You have heard it said that “You, that should not live alone,” [and] goes on to say, “but on every word that comes from the mouth of our Lord.”

This fuller section of what he is referring to is coming from the renewal of the covenant with the Israelites, as they were about to enter the Promised Land. It said, “Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live, and increase, and may enter and possess the land of the Lord, promised to you on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert for these 40 years to humble you, and test [you] in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger, and then feeding you with manna, which neither you, nor your fathers, had known to teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes in the word of God.”

So Jesus is giving us some insight here as to what this 40 days was for him, when Satan came and asked him to perform a miracle: “If you are the son of God, make some bread.” Jesus returned to the piety that he would have begun learning from his youngest years: “We have been taught that we don’t seek the bread; we seek every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The second temptation of Jesus in Luke is a temptation to glory and power. He takes him to some place where he can show Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and he says to him, “All of the glory and authority that you see before you I will make yours, if you worship

me.” Now, that sounds terrible. Who would worship Satan willingly, consciously? Who would decide to forego their vocation and their calling, to worship Satan?

But the actual presentation that was coming in Jesus’ life was much more subtle than that. Jesus hadn’t begun his ministry at this point. He had been baptized in a relatively small event, seen by very few people. Immediately after this, he was about to go to his home town, where they were going to stone him, because they didn’t believe in him.

But soon, he would become a spectacle. Soon he would have throngs of crowds seeking him. He would be performing miracles of incredible power; and, the test to him was, would he remain the son of man and stay humble in his vocation, or would he embrace the love and power and glory that people were ready to throw at his feet? The culmination of this came on Palm Sunday – which we will celebrate in a few weeks – when people were asking him to become king. They were throwing palms down on the ground, as he walked in, and saying, “Come, become our king.”

We’re in Iowa and we know that if you have a chance to run for President [laughter], people take it. [Laughter.] You don’t have to twist someone’s arm very hard to get them to run for President if there is a chance. If there is a 1-22 possibility of winning a primary [laughter], you’ll run.

Jesus was going to face that he was going to have the opportunity to overthrow and become this military leader. He could have turned from his vocation; he could have turned from this humble servant and claimed his genuine authority as the son of God, and Satan was offering this to him; but he was offering it with a twist: you can claim all of that; it will be great, if you just lay aside this call you have, and revel in the glory and the authority you can take.

Then, Satan’s final test in Luke is in Jerusalem, where Jesus is brought to the height of the Temple, and Satan says, “Jump off. Jump off and the angels will catch you.” This is anticipated [as] the hardest test Jesus would face. It is not the test to commit suicide – to jump off. It’s the test of not seeking that salvation from the angels. It’s the test of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus wrestled – felt the pain of this coming torture and death to take our place – to die on our behalf.

And, Satan was offering him a test: “Are you willing? Are you willing to let yourself just die, or are you going to call on the army of angels to come and rescue you?” And in each of these answers, Jesus calls back to the renewal covenant in Deuteronomy: Two answers – in Deuteronomy 6 and 1, and Deuteronomy 8 – and each of these is the story of the Israelites going into the Promised Land, and the Deuteronomist is recounting Moses telling the people before they were going, “God has brought you all this way; and, when you go into the land, you are going to have vineyards that you didn’t plant: you are going to have cities that you didn’t build. God is going to give you all of these things. But don’t forget, because if you just go in, pretty soon you are going to start saying, ‘This is because of my own productivity that I have this wealth, and my own amazingness has led me to this place where I have this land, and I don’t need God anymore.’”

So, the passage that Becky [liturgist] read to us this morning was the culmination of that. It was a call for them to remember: “When you come into the land, bring the first fruits of what you make, and bring it to the Temple and offer it; and, this is what I want you to say,

‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went into Egypt and they enslaved him. And, our God delivered him and his people, and led us through the desert and brought us into this land and gave it to us, not by our swords, but by the sounds of the trumpets.’”

Remember. Remember what God has done. It is easy to get caught up in what our abilities are capable of, and to look at our own strength; to look at the successes we have; to look at who our children have become and to gain a sense of ego from it; and, the trap that the Israelites felt – and sadly they failed him. If they could become too egocentric, too convinced of their own self-reliance and “I’m the one that is doing this,” they walked away from God, and they served all of these other gods instead of the God that brought them to Israel. The same test was before Jesus: Will you stay faithful? Will you be the son of God all the way through this ministry coming to you? Will you be self-reliant? Will you stay humble?

When I am convinced that it is “my good” that does it, life can be pretty tough – because I don’t know if I can find you the next Director of Music and Arts for your congregation. We can do our part and our team is seeking to be good stewards, and have found five fantastic candidates – but ultimately it is God who does this work; and, when we remember that, it is so much less difficult for us. When we remember that it is God who is doing the work – we do our part and it is God who does the work.

So, in this Lenten season, let us remember the call to the Israelites and the faithfulness of Jesus and the temptation; to remember who God is and who we are not, and to trust in God’s reliance and work through us.

Amen.