

1 Lent C - 21 February 2010
Deuteronomy 26:1-1; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
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To be lost and alone, to be cold and hungry. Most people know these as basic human fears. To be comfortable, secure, and accomplished. Most people recognize these as basic human aspirations. What is common to all of these is that they are sources of human temptation.

Temptation is the experience through Christians everywhere today are entering the season of Lent. Lent is a season in which people often adopt the spiritual discipline of denying themselves something that they enjoy. This is rather why we eliminate the 'Alleluia's' during Lent. In those moments when people are aware of missing what they have eliminated, they can inwardly reflect upon or pray about their relationship with God. Sometimes people adopt this discipline in reverse. They may add something, a habit or a project. When they are engaged in their additional something, they can experience inwardly the ways that this project of habit is born of their relationship with God.

I think Jesus' experience in the wilderness may suggest to people the addition of a greater awareness of their utter dependency upon God. I think his experience of temptation may suggest that people deny themselves the comfortable illusion that they are self-sufficient. The Old Testament reading for today suggests the value of both.

For several generations, the Israelites had been guests in the land of Egypt. As time passes, the kings of Egypt come to see them as outsiders impinging on the rights and privileges of the citizens. They resent the Israelites; they resent their God; and slowly they take away the freedoms of the Israelites until they are slaves. But God sends to the people their rescuer: Moses. Moses engages the king of Egypt in a battle of wits and a test of faith. And when he finally wins, he leads the people of Israel out of slavery and on a journey through the wilderness that will test their own faith greatly, until at last, they come now to the border of the homeland that God has promised them.

Moses is giving to the people a long list of other laws. 'Other' or 'secondary' laws – this is what the word 'Deuteronomy' literally means. Here, toward the end of this long list of laws and regulations, Moses tells the people that

they must symbolically turn over to God the very first and the very best from the harvests that they will gather.

Think about why this might matter. Think about how the people might feel about this after listening to the huge list of hundreds of minutely detailed rules and commandments. Here, outside the legendary promised land, and waiting eagerly to get in, perhaps the people are equally eager to pledge their faithfulness to all these laws of God. 'Sure,' they say, 'we will very definitely obey these regulations. And we will definitely give God the best of what God enables us to have.' And we can be sure that when they say it, they mean it.

But, honestly, with their destination so close that they can see it, they smell the grapes, the figs, the olives growing there, they can hear the sheep and cattle...with the fulfillment of their collective dream almost within their reach, the people will agree to almost anything to finish their journey. Moses could require them to stand their head for an hour every afternoon, and the people would vow to do so.

But will the people be as eager after they have come into the land? Will they be as eager after they have lived there for generation after generation, after they have become familiar with being comfortable, after they have become accustomed to circumstances and conveniences that once were unimaginable blessings just beyond their reach?

Is it possible that the people will someday look around at the cities that they have built, at the crops that they have planted and harvested, at the lives that they have shaped for themselves and their heirs, and wonder, 'Why should we be giving thanks to God for all these things that we have accomplished on our own? Is it possible? Isn't it likely?

So, at the end of this long list of ordinances, here at the peak of this mountain of laws, Moses tells the people that the thing they can do that is most important of all is to practice their faithfulness to God so as to remember, and never forget, that God is faithful to them.

It is the season of Lent, a term that originally meant 'springtime, but a term that now refers to the Church's

practice during that season. The Church has long used the season of Lent to recall the journey to his death on the cross that Jesus made for us and for all. It is a Lenten thing for people to do, then, to make time to ponder inwardly their own practice of faithfulness to God.

But people who are really young, are working hard at simply growing up. People in school are working hard at class work and homework. If people are employed or looking for employment, they are working hard. If people are retired, they are looking back upon a lifetime of having worked hard to earn these later seasons of life. Things may be going well for people, or people may be working hard to make things go better. And so compared to their consciousness of what they have worked hard to accomplish, or of what they are working hard now to try to get done, people we may not always show up at church with a ready consciousness of what God has done for them and is doing for them even still.

So, in one sense, I think God wants us to know that God accepts this in us. God has no expectation that each and every one of us, each and every time we come to church, shows up with uncontainable joy, unflagging confidence, and unailing trust in God. God knows that we are people. God understands this probably better than we do ourselves. After all, God made us.

At the same time, we are, after all, the image of God. And so, I think God want us to know also that God does not want us to surrender to the lowest common denominator of what it is to be people; but to strive to rise to the highest possible distinction of what it is to be people of God.

In the wilderness, the temptations that face Jesus are all about persuading him to surrender. Jesus is God's self given over to the vulnerabilities of what it is to be a human being. If Jesus can be persuaded to surrender to these vulnerabilities, then the shortcomings of humanity will have defeated God's power to reach beyond them in order to restore humanity to relationship with God.

The devil is named Satan. And the name means 'accuser.' Satan is the embodiment of an accusation and a belief that persist to our own day. It is the belief that leads to violence and self-destruction. It the accusation that humanity is beyond redemption. Jesus is the embodiment of God's belief that we are not.

'You are out here all alone,' Satan tells Jesus. 'You have no one but yourself. You have proven yourself to be devoted to God.' 'Now go ahead and work a miracle to save yourself.' 'Worship me,' says Satan. 'Just go through the motions; and I will award you dominion over all people.' 'Jump off the tower of the Temple,' Satan says. 'Let God send the angels to save you. Then the most faithful people around will have to recognize that you are truly the Savior.'

'To sustain yourself, compromise your participation in humanity' 'To accomplish your goals quickly and easily, compromise your participation in divinity.' 'To achieve popularity and fame, compromise the union of your will with the will of God.' They are temptations that Jesus meets now in the wilderness. They are the same temptations that Jesus will meet them again as he draws near the cross. They are the same temptations that you and I and people all around us are facing every day.

We may be tempted to believe that our accomplishments are our own. We may be tempted to believe that we are alone, with no one around us to care. And Jesus is saying, 'I have been where you are.' Jesus is saying, 'Trying to force divine intervention is trying to restrict the Love of God. But God's Love has no limits. It always accomplishes more than we can ask or imagine.' Jesus is saying, 'False gods of various description will always promise rewards. But only God is able to award us those things that are right and good and best for us. And God alone is willing to give them.' Jesus is saying, 'Yes, humanity exists by satisfying the basic needs alone. But by striving after needs that are higher and holier than these, we truly live.'

To you and to me, and through us to those around us, in a wilderness of temptation, Jesus is saying, 'In order that I might help you, I have been where you are. Now look within you,' Jesus says, 'and look around you. I am here now to help you to find me where I am.'

And so may Almighty God, who has given us the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us quiet strength to follow Christ in the way that he has gone before, that we may share in the blessings of new and eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns One God, now and for ever. Amen.