

First Sunday in Lent, Year C

February 22, 2010

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4: 1-13

### **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

*{1}* When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, *{2}* you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. *{3}* You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." *{4}* When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, *{5}* you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. *{6}* When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, *{7}* we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. *{8}* The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; *{9}* and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. *{10}* So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. *{11}* Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

### **Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16**

*{1}* You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, *{2}* will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." ...*{9}* Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, *{10}* no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. *{11}* For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. *{12}* On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. *{13}* You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. *{14}* Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. *{15}* When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. *{16}* With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

### **Romans 10:8b-13**

*{8b}* "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); *{9}* because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. *{10}* For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. *{11}* The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." *{12}* For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. *{13}* For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

### **Luke 4:1-13**

*{1}* Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, *{2}* where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. *{3}* The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." *{4}* Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" *{5}* Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. *{6}* And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. *{7}* If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." *{8}* Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" *{9}* Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, *{10}* for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' *{11}* and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" *{12}* Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" *{13}* When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Today's Gospel reading is an example of how some Bible stories really manage to pack a lot of good "stuff" into a relatively small package. It is well written, subtle, and has many layers of potential meaning. I'm about to share two possible "spins" on the Gospel, but before doing that some fair warning is in order. I searched many commentaries and was unable to locate any that pointed out or noticed my particular "spins", so it is entirely possible that I am just plain wrong or totally off base.

I thought it would be a good thing to begin by sharing two of the most common understandings of this story, the ones that the majority of Bible scholars seem to agree upon.

First, those of Jewish background (as most of the earliest followers of Jesus were) or familiar with Judaism (as many of the Gentile "God fearers" would have been) would have heard words like "wilderness", "testing", and "forty" and almost automatically thought of the Exodus and the wandering of the Israelites through the desert for forty years. It is also significant that the Bible verses Jesus quoted in the story are all from Deuteronomy chapters 6-8, all of which happen to be in a context dealing with the Israelite's testing in the wilderness. When God chose the people of Israel, God chose them not only for their own benefit, but to be a "light to the nations". God had big plans for all of humanity through the people of Israel. As you know, the Israelites didn't fare very well when it came to their part of the relationship with God. This was especially (though not exclusively) clear in the stories of the wandering through the desert. God remained faithful even when most of the people did not and God promised to work through a "faithful remnant" when the majority of the chosen people were making bad or other choices. So, in this Gospel story, the author of St. Luke's Gospel was saying that God still had big plans for the earth and where Israel had consistently failed (as demonstrated in the wilderness stories), Jesus succeeded. *Jesus* was the faithful remnant through whom God would bring healing and reconciliation to all the world. Jesus was the "fulfilled" (not the new or replacement) Israel. God was faithful. God was still up to big things in the world. Anyone who aligned him or herself with Jesus, who clung to Jesus in faith and trust, became part of this. "For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" (Romans 10: 13) God always finds a way.

Second, this story of how Jesus both faced and withstood temptation would have served as a model of encouragement for Christians who, obviously, were also facing their own. Of course, some of these would have been personal, but the earliest groups of believers were also under a great deal of pressure to compromise with the "powers

that be”, with the kingdom of Caesar, in order to survive and even spread the message. There would have been choices to make all along the way. Was self-preservation at any cost worth it?

Now, on to the “twists”.

Part of the appeal of this story, at least for me and probably for many Americans, is that Jesus appears to be the ultimate “rugged individualist”. He “pulls Himself up by His own bootstraps”, faces His demons alone, and succeeds without any help from anyone. But, is that really the point? What if it is exactly the opposite?

The story makes it very clear that Jesus was in the wilderness and very much alone. So, it stands to reason that the encounter between Him and the devil had to be a private conversation. No other eyes or ears around! The text does not seem to indicate that the choices the devil was taunting Jesus with were for the benefit anyone other than Jesus. In St. Luke’s telling, when the devil asks Jesus to “command this stone to become a loaf of bread”, the word for “stone” is singular in the Greek. There’s also nothing to indicate that anyone would have been gathered to see Jesus if He had, in fact, decided to fling Himself from the Temple height (assuming it wasn’t simply some sort of “vision” that Jesus was being shown, which is even more likely).

Just beneath the surface of the devil’s encounter with Jesus, then, lies this: “Come on! It’s just you and me here. Who’s gonna know? What could it possibly hurt? This has nothing to do with anyone but you. This is no one else’s business. What possible difference could it make? You are on your own.”

Among the biggest lies the devil told in the wilderness was that we each exist as “islands unto ourselves”: who we are and what we do is our own business and has absolutely nothing to do with anyone else. In saying “no” to the testing of the devil, Jesus rejected this and pointed it out as the deception it is. It is interesting to think how things might have turned out if Jesus had decided to go ahead with one or another of the choices presented by the devil. What might the world look like? Would we even be sitting here?

We probably make the worst and most potentially destructive choices when we believe that we are alone, isolated, or aloof.

I did not watch Tiger Woods’ apology on TV, but heard enough of the sound bites to know that he was at least, by his own admission, feeling isolated and aloof.

This does not end at issues of personal morality. Before entering seminary, when I was active in community organizing, it seemed pretty clear that so many of the land developers either did not see, could not see, or chose to ignore, the consequences their choices would make on so many others. They were “aloof”.

This past Tuesday, during a meeting of our local Lutheran clergy, Pastor Sue Sprowls made a comment that helped refine my perceptions about Lent. It is, in fact, a time to “take stock”, but during Lent we do it *together*, as a worldwide Church community as well as a local congregation. We don’t “go it alone”. Of course, this is for mutual support and encouragement, but what if there’s even more to it than that? What if we not only “take stock” *with* and among each other, but *for* each other as well? What if, in becoming more receptive to the message of God’s love and grace, and in becoming better people, we are also making our families, our work places, our congregation, our Church, and even our world a better place? To use the quote by Gandhi, made popular by President Obama: “*Be the change you hope to see in the world.*”

Before moving on, I’ll point out one of the many negative consequences of believing that our decisions, hopes, dreams, successes, gifts, choices, etc., don’t make a difference beyond ourselves. “Why bother getting involved? I’m just one voice. No one really cares. No one is really listening. What difference can I make?” So, you won’t ever choose to become involved, sign that petition, write that letter, etc.

On to the second “twist”.

It is sometimes said that in this story the devil was tempting Jesus to be more than He was or to doubt His calling and identity. That observation needs just a bit of refinement. The devil knew exactly who Jesus was. Since Jesus had just come from His own Baptism, Jesus knew who He was as well, since God had told Him. In the Greek, the word commonly translated as “if” (If you are the Son of God...) can also be understood as “since” (Since you are the Son of God...). The temptation, or testing, was not for Jesus to be more or other than He was, but *to do more than God expected or required*. It’s almost as though the devil is saying, “Come on, there’s got to be more to this “Son of God” thing. You’re just dirty, hungry, and tired. You must be getting it wrong. Turn things up a notch or two.”

I would “tweak” that just a bit and apply it to *perfectionism*, understood as the relentless quest to be or do more than is expected or required, be it by God or anyone else.

Perfectionism is spiritual suicide and anyone who either is, lives with, or works for a perfectionist knows what it does to relationships.

As with isolation and aloofness, some really bad choices can be made or really bad things done in the name of “perfection”. This is perhaps among the most dangerous of temptations because it is so subtle and so well hidden underneath things that appear good and “reasonable”.

On this first Sunday of Lent, perhaps the message all of us need to hear is that, as daughters and sons of God, we never “go it alone” and we not expected to be perfect or even successful, but faithful in and to the struggle in whatever form the “wilderness” happens to take.

Let us pray. My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Thomas Merton, 1915-1968)

AMEN.