

Bible Study
First Sunday in Lent, Year C
February 14, 2016

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

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Who knew that we could talk about stewardship in some time of the calendar year other than September, October, or November? This passage from Deuteronomy helps us to recall that everything that we have is a gift. All that is, is God's, not ours – we have only received a portion. We return a portion of what we have received from God in gratitude. In the laws of Deuteronomy, this came in many forms, including the first fruits offering that we read about in this text. Much of stewardship, much of a life of faith, is about gratitude. While people often ask each other what they are giving up for Lent, this penitential season is about far more than sacrificing chocolate, ice cream, or even meat on Fridays. Lent is a season of introspection and intentional self-reflection. As you begin your Lenten journey, consider the ways in which you are grateful for all that God has given you. Also consider the ways that you have forgotten this spirit of gratitude, taking the gifts you have received for granted or as the rewards of meritocracy.

- How can your prayer and reflection this Lenten season return you to a humble posture of gratitude before our good and gracious God?
- Consider the theme of first fruits in the Deuteronomy passage: What is the first fruit that you need to give up, or return to God?
- What makes that sacrifice difficult?
- How would you pray through that difficulty?
- How might you act in faith and let this difficulty go?

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

What is it like to rest in God? The founding abbess of my religious community tells the story of walking in on one of the senior nuns in her old convent praying. She recalls being struck by the image of serenity before her, as her older sister seemed to simply glow with holiness and be at true peace. Wanting to share that same experience in her own prayer life, the young and precocious nun asked the more experienced religious woman how she prays. Her sister responded saying something both simple and profound: "I just sit here and let God love me." Sometimes God's love is a hard thing for us to recognize. We may cognitively know that God loves us because our Scriptures and our tradition tell us so. But do you know it more deeply?

- Take some time now to dwell in the shelter of the Most High. Breathe deeply. As you inhale, mentally speak the words, "You are my refuge and my stronghold." As you exhale, mentally speak the words, "my God in whom I put my trust." Sit in silence, really feeling your breath, and just let God's love wash over you. Perhaps, you will find, that is how you will grow more deeply in your trust in God.
- Do you believe that God truly loves you unconditionally? Do you feel it in your bones that you are loved by God?
- How does this time of meditation meet with your reflection on the passage from Deuteronomy above?

Romans 10:8b-13

In many Episcopal churches, when the deacon or priest announces the Gospel, the people in the congregation trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads, lips, and chests. This is to signify the Word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ, to be always on our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts. This excerpt from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome begins: "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."

- How do you live your life with the Gospel written in your heart, always on your mind, and proclaimed not only through your lips, but also in your actions?
- Do you publicly confess, with confidence, that Jesus Christ is Lord? If not, why not?
- What keeps you from being able to, or being comfortable with, making such a public confession of your faith?
- What would it take for you to be able to proclaim, confessing with your lips, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life?

Luke 4:1-13

Prior to seminary, and prior to taking a staff job as the youth minister at two other congregations, I was heavily involved with the youth ministry at my sponsoring congregation. I taught the high school Sunday school class and led the youth group. Each week when I prepared the lesson, I would draw a theme out of the readings and find a song, typically non-religious, that connected. The class would open with prayer and a check-in. We would then play the song to introduce the lesson and read the text. Next we would discuss the lesson, offering questions for reflection, playing the song again while they respond to the questions for reflection, sharing reflections, and closing in prayer. When I prepared the lesson on this passage, I decided to use the song "Burden in My Hand," by Soundgarden.¹ As they listened to the song, they were given a simple instruction: imagine you are being spoken to by the Devil in the same way Satan spoke to Jesus in order to tempt him in the Gospel reading.

One of the great gifts of the ministry of the priesthood is the ministry of penance and absolution. While confession is good for the soul at all times of the year, it is especially appropriate in the Season of Lent. If you are so inclined, and I hope you are, use these reflections to guide you in preparation for confession with your priest. Sin begins when we turn away from God in unfaith, when we do not trust in God's goodness.

- What does temptation look and feel like in your life?
- How is it most often made manifest?
- Perhaps another way to ask yourself these questions is to ask: What keeps me from being in the best possible relationship with God, others, and myself?
- What gets in the way of your relationship with God?
- What keeps you from seeing the image of God in others or in yourself?
- Think back one more time to your reflection on Deuteronomy, is that thing which you find difficult to let go of something that is seductive to you, that tempts you?
- Having reflected on these readings, what sins are brought to your mind?
- How can you grow past them through the aid of your pastor, beginning with the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent? Let this become a part of your regular spiritual discipline and you will find a new freedom in Christ that you may never have experienced before.
- How does Jesus, in his example in the Gospel narrative and, more importantly, in your relationship with the Risen Christ, strengthen you to resist temptation?

- How does Jesus' faith and trust and absolute devotion to God, inspire you to more fully devote yourself to that which is holy?

Written by Brother Paul Castelli

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmlqIVxUuKs>

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