

“Now That We’ve Entered the Promised Land...”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13
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Preached February 25, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

If you search your Bible, you will not find anything about the season of Lent. That’s because it is the creation of the church. Some historians suggest that the establishment of the season of Lent was part of a reform movement in the early church. They speculate that in the years following Jesus’ death and his failure to return quickly as promised and expected, the faithful began to become complacent in the spiritual practices. The time Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry seemed to be a good idea for him, so perhaps a parallel 40 days might be a good idea for the Christian. And so the season of Lent became a fixture in the church as a way to focus the faithful in their preparation for the Lord’s return.

There has been no less need in each subsequent generation to “focus the faithful,” to help people give the proper attention to the cultivation of their faith so that they might live as Christ commanded them to live, loving their Lord with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving their neighbors as they love themselves. These are not always easy things to do, especially with evil whispering in your ear, courting you with promises of a life free from suffering and full of success, and practically immortal. These are, after all, the delusions with which the devil tempted Jesus, and with which are confronted each time we turn on the television, or read a magazine, or browse the internet. There is always a new pill or

guru on the market offering us a quick fix to the human condition and they can be quite tempting. And so Lent is still necessary.

Traditionally, Lent has focused on developing in the faithful the spiritual discipline of sacrifice as a means to arriving at a contrite heart, one ready to receive the risen Christ. The tangible expression of the discipline of sacrifice has been abstinence, more commonly known as fasting. “Giving up something for Lent,” as you may have heard the expression before, is designed to help you more fully appreciate the frailty of your humanity, and remind you of your distance from the God who created you. The humility engendered by fasting makes the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross all the more powerful since God’s own son was offered to make up for those same human frailties. Christ gave up his life for us; the least we can do is give up chocolate for 40 days for him.

The practice of fasting has seen its ups and downs but I do heartily commend it to you as a way to remind yourself that it is possible to make the kinds of sacrifices God calls us to make as followers of Jesus Christ. Your Lenten fast may be a small thing in the overall scheme of things but it can be symbolic of the larger sacrifices. Your choice of a thing from which to abstain should be something which will make each day noticeably different from those that came before Lent, something which draws your attention to the fact of your effort. In my case, for the past several years during Lent, I have for these 40 days drunk nothing but water – no coffee, no milk, no juice, no wine – nothing but what I need as a human being. I

am not telling you this to appear somehow more spiritual, but to give you at least one idea of what might be a meaningful fast. My mornings are *very* different during Lent, I can assure you, without the comfort of my usual 8-10 cups of coffee.

As spiritually profitable as abstention may be, it is not the only way one can observe Lent. Some people find the practice of “Taking on something for Lent,” as opposed to “Giving up something for Lent,” to be quite meaningful, noting that the Christian life is not one of denial, but of abundance. What they take on for Lent is not an excess of the things they already enjoy, or a new vice they should not be enjoying, but in fact something which focuses them as they move toward that wonderful Easter day. Some people take on a more regular reading of Scripture, or a new form of prayer, or a more intentional good deed for the day. None of these things is going to change the world, but they aren’t designed for that. You see, the practice of spiritual disciplines changes us, and then we change the world.

At ECF during Lent, I hope together we can do both, both give something up *and* take something on. In terms of giving something up, my suggestion is that we give up our alleluias as we count down toward the day when they are really deserved. And so, in worship, our songs and prayers will be those without that word, and these few weeks at church will perhaps feel a little different than the other weeks of the year. And when Easter comes, we will all the more appreciate the joy of shouting our alleluias at the raising of our Savior. As for what we can take on, let me suggest that we take on the discipline of generosity, the practice of

which will be in the form of more intentional reflection on the theme of generosity during our Lenten worship, and hopefully in each of your own homes.

Let me say one more thing about Lenten disciplines before turning to tonight's Scripture. If you've read the Bible in enough places, you've probably come across the number forty. You remember Noah's forty days and nights in the ark, the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, the forty days Moses spent with God on Mount Horeb, the forty year reigns of David and Solomon, and many others. You have probably figured out by now that the significance of the number forty is more important than the exact amount of time Noah spent on the ark, or the exact number of years the Israelites ate their manna and quail. You see, when the number forty is used in the Scriptures, it signifies that something dramatic is happening, that what takes place after the forty days or years will be completely different than what was happening before them. The same is true in today's story in Luke. Jesus enters the desert a private citizen, an unknown carpenter, and comes out to begin a very public ministry that will end in a very public way. This too is the point of undertaking a Lenten discipline: that we come out of Lent different than we went into it, that come resurrection day, we are ready to live fully in the grace of that experience.

I want to focus tonight on our passage from Deuteronomy as we begin to explore the discipline of generosity. It is a passage that in some ways parallels tonight's Gospel story, as well as our own personal stories of faith. As you know,

Deuteronomy is considered to be Moses' last will and testament, his final words of wisdom to his followers before he dies, and before they enter the promised land.

Deuteronomy is a restatement of much of the law that is found in Exodus, a sign to us that this stuff is very important, important enough to be included twice in the collection of the sacred texts of our spiritual ancestors. Tonight's passage is the final section of that restatement of the law, and it has to do with the proper response to the promises of God. Forty years earlier, God had promised Moses that the Hebrews would be delivered to a land of their own, and that promise is about to come due. And when they get there, God wants to make sure they do not forget who gave them the land, nor take that land for granted, and so is instituted the commandment to offer the first fruits of the harvest to God: "When you have come into the land," Moses reminds them, the land "that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 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." And then they are to go in, and declare to the priest their arrival in the promised land, and recite the story of how they came to be the grateful people who are now bringing the first fruits to their God. And after that, best of all, they shall, to use Moses' words "together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you...celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house.

The gift of the first fruits is, it seems, related to gratitude for the mighty acts of God which have not only given them this land, but which have brought them to this point in their journey. The words they are to say to the priest when they bring the gifts recall God's promises and the freedom from slavery in Egypt. Without that divine intervention, they would still be slaves making more bricks with the same quantity of straw, still be at the mercy of a hard hearted Pharaoh, still be a proud people with no place to call their own. And so the gifts to be brought are not rent payments for the use of the land of the Canaanites, or mortgage payments to a God who has loaned them the money to buy the land of milk and honey, but offerings of gratitude to a God who has done for them what they could not do for themselves, to save them and to provide for them.

Now, you might read this passage and ask yourself, "What kind of gift of gratitude is this, really, since God had to command them to do this." I mean, coerced giving is kind of lame, isn't it? Elsewhere in Scripture, we are called to give with glad and generous hearts, but here it is the form of a commandment. Isn't the motivation from which we give actually more important than the gift itself? Well, it seems that God doesn't look at it exactly like that. Yes, these gifts are gifts of gratitude, but what is behind the commandment speaks to the reasons we need to give. This is why the recitation of the history is the key part of making the gift. It is so that the people do not forget their God in the midst of their glee at having a new homeland, so that they do not think it is by their own power that they have

conquered this new land, so that they do go off and forget the God who saved them now that they seem to have no need for God. In telling them to present their offerings in the way we read, I think God is leading them toward practicing the spiritual discipline of generosity, a fundamental part of which is letting our giving flow from our gratitude for all God has done for us. Without the memory of how we got to be where we are today, the giving we do becomes a payment for services rendered, or an obligation dictated by custom, and its not as if the gift is then meaningless, but that we have left behind the part that builds us up spiritually, the dependance on God for our salvation and our provision. The gift is the means to remember who we are and Whose we are, and God knows we need constant reminders to remember that.

This is not the only place in the Old Testament where the people are commanded to give the first fruits of the harvest and a tithe, or ten percent of their income, but it the precedent-setting place, the one that provides the rationale for subsequent commandments to give. In this case, it is a gift related specifically to the entrance into the land. Yet, the provision of God did not stop once they took possession of the land. They continued to live in the land under the blessing of God and so were called to give regularly from their gratitude. It is here that I want to draw a parallel to your life and to mine. As Christians, we have not been promised a piece of land in the Middle East, and our salvation is not from the hand of Pharoah. But that does not mean we are exempt from the practice of the spiritual

discipline of generosity. You see, we may not have entered the promised land of milk and honey, but we have entered into life in Jesus Christ. We may not have been suffering at the hands of an Egyptian king, but we have been delivered from the hand of sin and led to a place of safety and security, a place where our God protects us from our enemies, a place in which God provides for us. Jesus Christ is our promised land and we have entered in. And just like the Israelites, we always need to remember what God has done for us, we always need to tell the story of God's mighty acts and give from the gratitude which that memory is designed to provoke.

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before taking possession of the land. Those forty years were a period of testing, of temptation, of trial. Those forty years were not a lot different than the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. They were hungry, they were tempted to return to the safety of the past. Yet they persevered, relying on the manna God provided. There is a distinct echo from the past heard in the story of Jesus' temptation. But remember what the number forty signifies: that what comes after the forty is very, very different than what took place before the forty. Just like the Israelites, Jesus enters the land God has led him to, and he takes possession of it, and he settles in it, and he does all of this on our behalf, to lead us to our Promised Land. And when Jesus enters that land, he too offers his first fruits of gratitude with his heart, his hands, and his voice. He gives of himself to God's people in ministries of preaching, teaching,

and healing. He never forgets the story of God's mighty acts, that the Spirit sustained him in the wilderness in the midst of those temptations. He never forgets who he is and Whose he is.

The first fruits we are called to give in gratitude are not only monetary. Just as important is that we give God the first and best parts of all we have to offer, all the while remembering how we got where we are. The discipline of generosity is God's gift to us so that we can remember each time we give, that it is because of God that we have *anything* to give at all. This Lent, as we spend some time thinking about the discipline of generosity, let us not only offer our first fruits in gratitude for entering the life of Jesus Christ, but let us do so remembering what it was like to be led there in the first place. May we be a different people after this forty days of Lent. Amen.