

Sermon – Daily Bread
Sunday, March 6, 2022
Scripture Readings – Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Deuteronomy 26:1-11. The setting is a festival at the conclusion of the harvest of grains. The thank offerings of grain from the first fruit of the harvest include a litany of Israel's history. Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah and understands the importance of memory. Not only does memory allow each generation to relive God's redemption from the past, it opens them up to the awareness of and gratitude for God's continuing activity in their own lives and forms their identity as God's people. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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, 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 God's 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 God 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. Amen.

The Christian faith is also based on the collective memory of the people of Christ. Each year we begin the season of Lent, remembering Jesus' temptation in the wilderness following his baptism. Our second scripture reading is Luke 4:1-13. Luke closely connects the temptation of Jesus with his identity as the Son of God. Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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.'" 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 God.'" 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, 'God will command God's angels concerning you, to protect you,' 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Daily Bread"

The text: Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Luke 4:4

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we gather with gratitude for the daily bread we receive from your generous hand, nourishing our bodies and bolstering our spirits in times of temptation. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Over the years theologians and ministers have interpreted the meaning of Christ's temptation with the hope of adding leaven to our lives so that we may rise when faced with our own. Twentieth century theologian William Barclay, in his commentary on Luke suggests the first temptation is the sin of materialism, the second is the sin of compromise and the third is the sin of sensationalism.

In the early years of my faith development, the teachings of Barclay were my bread and butter; however, as I tasted more of life, I found this interpretation too simplistic for the sophisticated interaction between Christ and the Tempter, during which Christ eloquently responds with rich words of Scripture.

Certainly, the tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort more important than spiritual values diminishes our lives and relationships. We have all known those who are rich in things and poor in spirit. However, we live in a material world and having material goods is not a sin. The generosity of people with material goods has enriched the lives of many and contributed to the kingdom of God. Certain material goods are necessary for life. Daily bread is one of those.

Compromise is also an essential part of life. Any of us who are married, have had a child, have been in a long-term relationship or work with colleagues know that give and take is a necessary part of healthy relationships. Sometimes people compromise too much and lose themselves; however, compromise is not a sin. It is an art form, and we need a little more compromise in the world at large.

There is also a time and a place for sensationalism. A spectacular sunset can fill our senses and deepen our gratitude for the Creator. Sometimes sensationalism is used to manipulate the truth; however, sensationalism is not a sin. It is true that all of these things (material goods, compromise, and sensationalism) are misused by human beings; however, they are not sins in and of themselves.

The true temptation is to attempt escaping our human experience, the journey of life which we cherish, yet also takes us down desolate roads that starve us and through life's losses which leave us famished. Nothing epitomizes our humanity more than the need for daily bread, both physically in the grains, crumbs, and loaves that nourish our bodies and spiritually in the words, memories, and stories that bolster our faith and solidify our identity as children of God.

Lent is the season to embrace our humanity, to accept our mortality, and to affirm our need for a Savior. On Ash Wednesday we remember our beginning and end with our Genesis in the garden, formed from the clay of the earth by the Potter into a mortal human being: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

On the first Sunday of Lent, we meet our Savior in the wilderness conversing with the Tempter, Blessed Jesus, God Incarnate. What stands out for those of us who are privy to the encounter between Jesus and the Tempter is what Jesus is tempted to do. If someone asked you or me to command a stone to become bread, the temptation would be minimal for the simple reason that it is beyond our capacity.

Satan is tempting Christ to be God...at his lowest, most vulnerable place on his human journey, hungry and exhausted, Jesus is given the opportunity to escape this "God-awful" human experience and become who he is and who he had the power to be...God.

However, the whole purpose of Christ's incarnation was and is to become one of us and to be with us --Emmanuel meaning "God with us." Jesus came to experience both the height of our joys and the depth of our anguish without abandoning us, so we can be confident that wherever life take us we do not walk alone.

Christ came to join us in our humanity and when the going got tough and the temptation was there, he did not retreat into being God. He did not in the wilderness, he did not in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he did not on the cross. "Blessed Jesus, God Incarnate" stays with us, as one of us, even unto death.

Unlike Christ, you and I cannot always endure the human experience. The temptation to escape and to pretend we are like God is enormous. Some may retreat to excessive materialism, self-destructive compromise, or unnecessary sensationalism. The ironic tragedy is that we often experience more pain when we succumb to escape rather than walk through the valley and wilderness before us.

All God really asks of us is to be human, accept our mortality, admit our weaknesses, and use our strengths to nourish each other along the way.

Though Christ refused to turn stones into bread, he faithfully fed the hungry. Though Christ refused the compromise of political power, he proclaimed God's empire of justice and peace in his preaching and teaching. Though Christ refused the sensationalism of jumping off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross confident God's commitment to resurrection will uphold him despite the world's decision to unjustly execute him.

The Bread of Life is our Daily Bread. Thanks be to God. Amen.