

Wilderness Now

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11,

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 his name. 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.’ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, 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. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 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. 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.

On this First Sunday of Lent, when we have just started our 40 day journey towards Easter, this is the Scripture given to us, but these were the words given to the ancient Israelites near the end of *their* 40- year journey through the wilderness. Sitting on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley, with the promised land in the distance, they were given these instructions for what to do once they have entered the promised land and settled in it.

In acknowledgment of how God had provided for their every need and in thanksgiving for God’s promise fulfilled for them, they were to offer the first fruits harvested from the land... which means, they had finally arrived in a place where *they could stay put and grow their own food!* And where were they to take the offering to? To a place their God would choose as a dwelling place. God, who had led them out of the slavery in Egypt and guided them through the wilderness, moving with them in the pillar of cloud by day and in the pillar of fire by night, will not leave them now but have a dwelling place and stay with them. Promise fulfilled, safe at last, with abundance of food, blessed with the enduring presence of God. What more could they ask for?

But the offering the first fruits wasn’t the only thing they were told to do. They were also to declare they had arrived! *and* how they got there... with God’s grace. They were to

retell the story of their journey, lest they forget. And this is a climax of the Exodus story but what they were to remember went back beyond the Exodus, before their ancestor even got to Egypt, to the time when their ancestor was a wanderer, vagabond through a foreign land, a migrant, vulnerable and needy in every way and how God provided for them.

This story which they were to remember and recite, as essential to their identity as God's people, didn't end with just them settling in the land God gave them. In verse 11, it mentions the aliens among them. They were to accept immigrants as residents in their midst and to include them in sharing the bounty God had given them. And if we read on, verses 12 to 13 add providing for orphans and widows as proof of faithfulness to God. This passage shows thankfulness to God and care for the marginalized as the intertwined outcomes of their ongoing journey as a people.

This was the story the people of God was to recite and remember near the end of their 40-year journey through the wilderness. This ancient narrative became the Israelites' inheritance; they are heirs to God's enduring promise. And if it was Israelites' inheritance, it was Jesus' inheritance. And if it was the inheritance of Jesus, who made us, too, the children of God, it is our inheritance. This is our story to remember, as people of God, as we begin our 40-day Lenten journey towards Easter: the faithfulness of God's care who brought us into being, delivers us captivity, guides us through the journey of discovering who we are in God, and therefore with one another, and remains with us unto God's Eternal Kingdom.

One curious thing about this story is that, while it recounts the hardships and oppression the people suffered and how God heard their cries and delivered them, it doesn't mention what a whining bunch they were, giving Moses such a hard time along the way. If their journey through the wilderness was a bumpy ride, it was because the people resisted, rejected and rebelled against God; they had to be dragged along kicking and screaming. What was their problem?

Is that how we want to go through our 40-day of journey towards our liberation? No. Fortunately for us, today, we are also given the story of how Jesus spent his 40 days in the wilderness, and through his example, we will see what their problem was and what we might learn from them about the challenge we are sure to face on our wilderness journey. Hear now, the Good News of Jesus Christ according to Luke 4:1-13.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ ⁴Jesus 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. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ ⁸Jesus 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, ¹⁰for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, ¹¹and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ ¹²Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Just as God did not leave the Israelites alone, Jesus is not left alone to wander the wilderness but is accompanied and even led into the journey by the Spirit. The time of trial comes when Jesus had gone forty days without eating. Though full of the Holy Spirit, his belly was empty and he was famished. In this depleted, most humanly vulnerable state, Jesus faces the devil.

This is a challenging story for modern Christians to “believe,” because it is so fantastical; the devil talks to Jesus directly and there is no witness to verify this really “happened.” Yet, if you remember one of the meanings of the word “myth,” it is a sacred story for communicating truth that is beyond explanation or demonstration. All synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke include this temptation story, though each tells it in slightly different ways. These evangelists recognized how these “temptations” reflected the real-life situations Jesus navigated through in his earthly ministry. The temptation story shows how Jesus’ ministry was all about confronting the enslaving and destructive power of the work of Satan or the devil.

And the devil is this power of evil in the world personified; it could be tendencies within ourselves, a personal being outside ourselves, or greater forces working in concert against the will of God for the world. The truth is, there is within us and around us strong opposition to love, compassion, well-being, wholeness, and peace that God intends for the life of the world, and the devil is the face the story gives this opposition power. We are sure to encounter them on our journey through the wilderness that is our lives. And Jesus shows us what a faithful response looks like.

The first temptation to turn a stone into a loaf of bread is not only personal but social. The devil was tempting Jesus to do something Jesus knew he had the power to do; turn a stone into bread... So the temptation was not to make a pact with the devil so he could do something he couldn't do otherwise. Rather, Jesus' temptation was to use his God-given power for an end other than its intended purpose. Jesus was tempted to use the power to satisfy his needs, when he was to trust God for his own needs.

In the wilderness, God provided manna for the Israelites to eat, telling them not to "save them for the next day," but to trust God will provide their needs tomorrow, as God did today. But the people did not trust God, and disobeying God's instruction, tried to save up manna to calm their anxious hearts and manna rotted.

Jesus tapped into his heritage of the exodus story, and responded to the devil by quoting from his Scripture, Deuteronomy 8:3, "Human being shall not live by bread alone." Jesus discerned that he was to trust God with all his needs.

The second temptation is political. The devil offered Jesus power over all the kingdoms in the world, saying they were his to give, on the condition that Jesus switches his loyalty to God to the devil. The world Jesus lived in was ruled by the tyrannical and absolute power of those who ruled the Empire. These political powerbrokers sought to expand their rule by abuse of their power, at the cost of the wellbeing of those who lived under them, especially those racial-ethnic outsiders who were not Roman citizens.

How tempting it must have been to just get rid of those power-thirsty, self-serving leaders and their corrupt minions, who were harming the lives of ordinary people. Again, Jesus is tempted to do what he has the power to do...to advance the kingdom of heaven here on earth. He would bring true peace to the world ruled by love and mercy... The rule of Love must flow out of Love, so to agree to worship the Devil instead and then to possess the world made no sense. Again, Jesus leans into the Scripture. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, he responded "the Lord God you shall worship; him you shall serve." The Israelites had also failed on this point, when they worshipped a golden calf when Moses was staying with God up in the mountain and didn't return quickly enough for them.

The third temptation is religious: to test God's promise. Seeing that Jesus leans on the Scriptures to discern his response, the Devil now quotes the Scriptures, Psalm 91, daring Jesus to put his life in danger on purpose to see if God really sends angels to protect him, as written in the

Psalm. For the third time, Jesus leans on the Scriptures, Deuteronomy 6: 16, “Do not put God to test,” the words for the Israelites who tested God, questioning whether God was with them or not when they were thirsty and wanted water.

In all cases, Jesus had the power to do what the devil dared him to do, but he was intentional in refusing to deviate from the purpose God sent him to the world. Jesus intentionally refused to abuse the power given to him to serve God’s will for him and for the world, and he intentionally relied on God’s words in the Scripture to discern what he was called to do each time. Temptations appeal to the power we have, but that power, if it is a life-giving power, must be used in service of God’s loving and caring will for the world.

Jesus who refused to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger, did feed the thousands of people. Jesus who refused the political influence offered by the devil, did proclaim the kingdom of God. Jesus who refused to jump off the temple to see if angels come to his rescue, went willingly to the cross to die, confident that God will raise him to new life, not only his, but through him the world.

Trust in God; discern what God is asking us to do, and respond accordingly in every moment the Life meets us. That is what the story of temptation of Jesus teaches us. The story of the ancient Israelites teaches us God will provide for our needs and fulfill the promises despite our failings. But for those who intentionally follow the way of Jesus, we are shown the way of trust and discernment.

Lent invites us to embrace an intentional way of life. For the forty days of Lent, we remember the wilderness the ancient Israelites traveled, and we remember the wilderness Jesus walked, and follow the example of Jesus to on the journey of our wilderness now.