

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 6, 2022

1st Sunday in Lent/Year C

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Second Reading: Romans 10:8b-13

Gospel Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Sermon Title: “With Us on the Journey of Faith”

Theme

These forty days called Lent are like no other. It is our opportune time to return to the God who rescues, to receive the gifts of God’s grace, to believe with the heart and confess with the mouth the wonder of God’s love in Jesus, and to resist temptation at every turn. This is no small pilgrimage on which we have just embarked. It is a struggle Jesus knew. It is a struggle Jesus shares. The nearness of the Lord, in bread and wine, water and word, will uphold and sustain us.

Texts:

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹When 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, ²you 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. ³You 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.” ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you 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. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The 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; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Then 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.

Second Reading: 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); ⁹because 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. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

¹Jesus, 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.’”

⁵Then 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.’”

⁹Then 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.

Sermon

You have probably noticed that I conclude all my correspondences with the expression, "With you on the journey of faith." During my seminary days, it occurred to me that that is the role of the pastor. I can teach and preach; I can encourage and inspire – but I can't do it for you – that is, have faith and nurture it. That is something you alone can do. Scripture tells us that each of us will get our moment in front of the seat of judgment, and while I would stand beside you and advocate for you if I could, 1) like having faith and nurturing it, I cannot stand by your side, and 2) I'll have my day too, and if you knew all I have to answer for you would rethink asking me.

As I have come to understand a life of faith, the metaphor of *a journey* works for me. Some journeys are short and uneventful, like going up to Cortland to visit friends. Some are longer and more eventful. I recently went on a journey halfway across the country and everything you can imagine went badly. And that is like life, right? Isn't that how you have experienced it? Some days are a breeze and some days are a challenge. Some periods of our life are a breeze and some periods are a challenge.

I recall a young woman from the little church up north who was diagnosed with cancer and her immediate reaction was a mixture of fear, disappointment, and despair. Over the many months that I ministered to her, she matured in faith to the point that just before she died, she told me, "I have that faith that surpasses understanding." I was still pretty green as a pastor then. Her words took my breath away. Though I journeyed with her, what was more important was that she journeyed with the LORD, and for her and her family, that is what made all the difference.

I modified my correspondence conclusion for this week's sermon title, "With Us on the Journey of Faith" because I see the theme of a journey in the First and Gospel Readings.

Last weekend's First Reading was the story of Moses' second journey up Mount Sinai to commune with the LORD to get another copy of the LORD's commandments, statutes, and laws that the Israelites covenanted with the LORD to

follow. All totaled there are 613 of them and it makes for interesting reading, and no, you and I are not obeying many of them. Read them for yourself, but I digress.

In the First Reading, we hear Moses's words to the Israelites as they ponder journeying across the Jordan River to possess the land the LORD has given them, the Promised Land as it has been named. If they stay faithful to the covenant they agreed to, things will go well for them because the LORD's part of the covenant was that the LORD will go with them – even ahead of them. They can possess the land; there can defeat their enemies – why? Because they are some awesome army? No! They had no army! They had the LORD on their side, leading the way. And the essence of this passage is that, when, not if, this happens, the Israelites are to make a modest first fruits offering of the produce of the land.

And here I feel compelled to remind you that *first fruits offerings* are just about the best statements of faith we can make because when we give of our first fruits, we give God the best first, trusting that we will be fine with the rest. What a great statement of faith, wouldn't you agree?

The Gospel Reading is of course the narrative of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. I don't feel led to get into the details of the narrative. You've heard it all before. I've preached it here before. However, I do feel led to tell you that we should be inspired by the faith of Jesus. I want you to notice that Jesus wasn't lured into the wilderness by the devil. Jesus didn't just happen to be wandering in the desert and the devil found him and thought this was a good time to attack the Son of God. Notice that Jesus,

¹was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

The Spirit of the LORD led Jesus into the wilderness where the LORD knew the devil lay in wait, Furthermore, several stories in scripture let us know that Jesus always knows what the future will bring, so he knew what he was about to face, and listen to me carefully here, because this is about the most important thing I am going to say,

He knew what he was about to face and he went anyway, trusting that the LORD was with him on his journey.

Boom! There it is!

And with that realization, that he knew what he was about to face and he went anyway, trusting that the LORD was with him on his journey, then we can look at the details of what the devil tempted him with and conclude that he passed the test. And what we can learn from this is that when we are tempted we can take strength and inspiration from this story because our Lord Jesus knows what it's like to be us, and he wants us to know that the LORD is with us on our journey of faith too.

When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we pray that the LORD will not lead us like the LORD did his own son. Ironic right? I believe that the LORD hears us when we pray that petition, and answers us. It is not the LORD who leads us into temptation, it is the evil that exists in the world that we have created.

I'll use the example of the addict because it is easy to understand. The addict who contemplates engaging his or her vice is not tempted by the LORD. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus has demonstrated for us that the LORD is with us on all our journeys, long and short, carefree and troublesome. And if we would just follow in faith, our example of the godly life, Jesus Christ. The LORD will be with us on our journey too.

I've had many legs in my spiritual journey. You have too. For me, pandemic isolation, March through May of 2020 was a desert. I know I suffered episodic depression. The Occasional Word that I sent out randomly back then was what helped me get through it.

I will also add this present time. It may be premature, time will tell, but I am over this pandemic, and find myself anxious about when and if *all* of our members will come back. And as your pastor, I am concerned about how you are doing, especially those of you I have not yet seen.

I think, if you would think about it you would have to admit that the pandemic has negatively affected you too, and so this Lent's theme is "Hope in the Desert." It is for you and for me. It will be real practical help that will bring hope.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Have you made a Lenten fast yet? Have you thought about giving something up for Lent? Or taking something on. It's never too late, and it's never too difficult because the Lord Jesus Christ conqueror of every temptation and test including death is with us on our journey of faith!

Prayer

Guiding God, throughout human history you have led your people in the way we should go, and the only thing you ask of us is that we remain faithful. But you know we have fits and starts and fail repeatedly. Be patient with us, send your Spirit to lead us in our journey, until we see you face to face. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen