

LIGHT FROM THE LECTIONARY

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Lent1C

RCL Readings:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When I would leave home, one or both of my parents would often tell me, "Remember who you are." It was their way of reminding me of my roots, of what I had learned, been taught, and my identity. They knew I would need that to make it on the journey ahead of me. It is something I have carried on in saying to my own children. In fact, my son was leaving this very day to take his first job. I called to him as he was about to go out and said, "Remember..." and he interrupted me, "I know. Remember who I am." He smiled and left.

Much of Deuteronomy is Moses saying to the people he led out of Egyptian bondage, "Remember who you are." He is trying to prepare them for what's ahead. Their journey, in a way, was coming to an end, at least that part of it. Soon they would enter the Promised Land. But a whole new phase of the journey would then begin. They would need to be constantly reminded of who they were and especially whose they were. To help them remember, he gives them many ceremonies, rituals, and laws. The reading today deals with offering the first fruits of their harvest in the new land, with what to do, how to do it, and why. The whole ceremony ended with a kind of thanksgiving feast to celebrate God's bounty. Even aliens or foreigners were to be included in the celebration. The heart of the ceremony was the presenting of tithes or portions of their harvest as offerings of thanksgiving to God, of remembering that all they had come from God through retelling the story of what God had done for them. In such simple but profound acts they were reminded of who they were and whose they were.

One of the things that stands out in my memory from growing up are the family meals we had. We would gather at Grandmother's house - aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and some people I had never seen before (I often wondered if they were just there for the food). The food was wonderful, of course. But what I enjoyed most was listening to the stories the adults told about things that had happened to them or some of our ancestors who were only names to me. But in those stories, they became real. I learned my great, great grandfather came to America from Ireland. I heard stories about the trip in the ship over here and how hard life was here. In those stories, you see, I learned where I had come from and who I was.

I try to continue this with my own family. We have a meal together at least once a week. We sit and tell about our day, often getting around to telling stories about when we were growing up.

Many of the stories I heard about my family I have shared with my children and hope they will with theirs.

Much the same thing happened in my church family and still does. Do you ever have homecoming services in your church? It's usually a service in the early fall. Often farmers and others brought special offerings that day (as they had received payment for the sale of their first crops) which we needed for the ministries of the church. But best of all was the homecoming meal. Family, friends, neighbors from far and wide came for this joyous celebration. Often we had the food on a long table that stretched all the way from one side of the parking lot to another. In those wonderful meals I heard stories of saints, stories of the last time we were together, stories that helped me understand who I was and whose I was.

Interesting, at the heart of the Christian family is also a meal. Ever notice that a table is central in almost every sanctuary (though some might refer to it as an altar). At the core of our faith is a meal, a meal whereby we remember again the story of what God has done for us in Christ. In that story and sharing that meal we are reminded who we are and whose we are.

Interesting too that it is a thanksgiving meal. One of the Greek words for the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion is "Eucharist." It literal means, "Thanksgiving." As part of the Holy Communion liturgy for many of us, we read "The Great Thanksgiving, " as this meal is a joyous celebration of thanks to God for the gift of salvation in Christ.

This meal reminds us of our identity. But who are we? We are disciples of Christ. We are those who have experienced the saving grace of God in Christ and who seek to follow and serve Christ each day and in every way we can. We are charged with sharing the story so that others hear it and know that they, too, can join the journey now and have a place at the table. For the Lord's Table is the longest table of all. It stretches around the world. No one any longer need eat or journey alone. Now they have a family. Now they can know who they are and whose they are.

Holy Communion is just that - communion. It is about renewing and deepening our communion with Christ and one another. We are not on this journey alone. We share the one cup and the one load of bread. We share the one Christ. We are in one family. We need one another.

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

The theme of this psalm is that of the protection God provides for those who trust in God and see God as their refuge. We do not know the setting or situation out of which it arose. Perhaps the psalmist had fled to the temple for sanctuary and found it there. Or maybe he had been sick and recovered. Perhaps there had been a great victory over oppressive enemies. Whatever the situation, he sings out in praise and confidence of God's provision and protection.

Verses 1-2. These set the theme of the whole psalm. It's a common image and theme in the Psalms - how God is like a mighty rock fortress, a place of sure and secure refuge for those who place their trust in God. For us today, it sounds strange or at least a little difficult to understand and appreciate. Few of us have had enemies at our doors trying to destroy us. In those days to have a place where you felt perfectly safe must have been more a dream than a reality. Cities had their massive walls and other defenses. The king often had a well fortified palace, all mostly

made of the most secure materials they could find - stone. But even all of these was often not enough. But there was another fortress that the psalmist always knew would hold up and out against all forces - God. His faith helped him feel like he was in an impenetrable fortress. The point, of course, is that the psalmist had learned to entrust his whole life, whatever the circumstances, into God's care.

Verses 9-16. These verses use further images to describe God's protection from the troubles life often brings. God even sends angels as kinds of divine bodyguards to watch over us (vs 11-12) which are the verses Satan uses in tempting/testing Jesus in today's Gospel reading. There is no evil, no situation, in other words, that's beyond the power of God's protective love and care. It reminds me very much of the words of Paul in Romans 8:39 that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which we know is ours in Christ.

I don't think the message of this psalm is that we will never suffer, that bad things will never happen to us. But it is saying that when we place our trust in God, we find a source of help, peace, protection, and strength to face and overcome whatever temptations and trials may come our way. We are not promised a bed of roses with no thorns. After all, this is the beginning of Lent, friends. We are on a journey to the cross! But that is not our ultimate destination, is it? We know it's a Good Friday world but we have an Easter faith with which to face it!

Romans 10:8b-13

I confess that sometimes I find the writings of Paul pretty tough reading, especially Romans. It's a weighty letter. Often his teachings you have to study, think about for some time, perhaps all your life, before you begin to comprehend the depth of truth there. Much of the Bible is like spiritual milk, you can easily consume and digest it. But some, like Paul's writing, is more like meat that you have to chew on for awhile. But in today's reading Paul gets at the heart of our faith and does so in a way that even a child could understand. I know, for these are among the first words I heard and learned from the Bible.

I suppose most of us have a passage or verse from the Bible that's very special to us. For many it's Psalm 23, or John 3:16. For me, it's Romans 10:9 and 10. Those were the first verses I memorized in Mrs. Lib's Sunday school class. Each class we began by reciting it. She had written them in large words on a piece of poster board which hung on the wall and may still hang there. Then, one day in the midst of a worship service, those words became so much more to me. I experienced the reality of them. I saw them in a whole new light and it was as if, like John Wesley, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I knew these words were true. I came forward that Sunday and confessed with my lips what I came to believe and experience in my heart. Soon after this I was baptized.

Being a Christian is an inward and outward experience. We hear the Good News about God's love for us in Christ with our minds and then come to believe and experience it in our hearts. Then we confess this belief with our lips. This confession is "Jesus is Lord," which is probably the earliest Christian creed. It means that we place our lives under the control of Christ. Not just some of our life, but all of it. It's saying that Jesus has our highest allegiance and loyalty. It's also a confession of belief that God "raised him from the dead," that is, that not only did Jesus live, he

still lives, he still reigns. A Christian is someone who knows daily and constantly the presence and seeks to place his or her whole life under the direction and control of Christ.

This is the Gospel or Good News that Paul writes about here and is never far from his thoughts. Romans, in fact, is his letter in which he seeks to most completely share his understanding of what God has done for us in Christ.

For much of his life Paul, as a Jew, believed that his relationship with God was primarily one of obedience to the Law, that is, the teachings of Moses and how they been interpreted and taught. One became righteous or right with God through the Law. But Paul came to believe that this was impossible, that it created slaves and self-righteousness. No one could really keep the whole Law. Paul came to see that in Christ God had provided a new way. He says in verse 4 of Romans 10: For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

The Good News is that we no longer have to try to earn our salvation. We could not do this anyway. What we could not do, God has done for us in Christ. God has accepted and forgiven us. This is grace, God's unmerited favor and love. We do nothing to earn it. We only receive it through faith, through trusting that what God has indeed offered love and forgiveness through Christ. This is not something Paul merely thought but something he had experienced and it profoundly changed his life. It is also what I experienced that day in the worship service when those wonderful words he wrote so long ago, committed to my mind, but at last became a heartfelt experience.

Paul spent the rest of his life sharing this Good News. He was opposed. There were always forces from within and outside the church that wanted to revert back to salvation by works in some form. Paul resolutely fought against it. There were, for example, who said faith in Christ alone was not enough, that one also needed to be circumcised, and obey all the Laws of Moses to be saved (see Paul's Letter to Galatians). But such was to go back into slavery. Why would we ever wish to do that and forsake the liberty, the freedom of God's gracious acceptance in Christ? Yes, Paul of course believed in good works. But they came as a result of experiencing God's grace, not as a prerequisite for receiving it.

Just as in Paul's day, there always seems to be someone coming along claiming to have some new and improved version of the Good News. Just recently I heard someone on the radio speaking of the kind of things we had to do or not do, and he had a very long list, in order to make sure we were right with God. It is just another form of salvation by works, earning our place with God rather than accepting it freely offered from God.

The Gospel, this grace, is the great equalizer. That's one of Paul's major points in this passage and in all his writings. No longer is our relationship based on what we do, like acts of obedience to the Law, so priced by his own people (for Paul was a Jew). No, Jesus came and offered God's grace, God's forgiveness to everyone - Jew and Greek. No longer must we build our own steps through good works up to God. No, we all stand on equal ground now at the foot of the cross, looking up to the one lifted up, who lifts us all up to God.

Luke 4:1-13

If you ever take a trip, you know there come times when you get to a fork in the road. Maybe the map isn't clear or you don't have a map. Maybe there's not a road sign in sight. You don't know which road will take you to where you need and want to be. Sometimes you just guess and find yourself on the wrong road, don't you? Unless you are a man, for we men never get lost, do we?

I was walking down the street not long ago when a large truck stopped by the curb. A man rolled down the window and asked me, "I need to make a delivery. Can you tell me where the service road is?" I knew immediately the road he needed and gave him directions.

This reading from Luke is about finding and staying on the right road on this journey. Jesus is being tempted to take another path than the one he had chosen. Would he yield? Would he take an easier path, the one everyone seemed to think he should?

It was really the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. He comes to the Jordan and listens to the preaching of John the Baptist. Jesus feels that now is the time for him to begin his ministry. What does he do? Does he sound trumpets and tell everyone who he is, gather a following? No. He goes into the waters of the Jordan, to the same waters in which sinners were being baptized and is baptized himself. At the very beginning of his ministry he identifies with sinners. He reveals the path he feels God has for him to travel - one of service, of even being a suffering servant in order to bring salvation to sinners. He is baptized with sinners at the beginning of his ministry and dies between two sinners at the end. Jesus chose the service road. And God said, "With you I am well pleased."

But no sooner had he been baptized than he finds the road taking him into the wilderness, the place where the children of Israel found themselves so long ago, the place of testing, and they pretty much failed the tests. Jesus goes there and he is tested as to if the service road is really the one he should follow.

A voice comes to him:

"A servant is not what the people want or expect. They were looking a messiah who could dazzle them, feed them, do spectacular things to gain a following. Besides, you are hungry. Why should you, God's Son, go hungry. Use your powers for yourself. Take this road."

"No, I will stick with the service road," Jesus answers. But the tests continue.

"Why not leap from the top of the temple? You know the people believe the messiah will do that. Why not do it? You can't be hurt after all. You are the Son of God. That will really get you started off right."

"No, this is the road I must take and no other," Jesus replies.

"But the people expect a military messiah, one with political power and might. Bow down to me and I'll give you all of that and more."

"No, only God is worthy of such worship, and God had called me to follow this road. I will continue on it."

And the voice left him, but it would come back (vs 13).

We can count on the same kinds of experiences on our journey. When you have been to the Jordan and the Spirit fills you, giving you a vision from God that captures your imagination, do not be surprised when you find yourself in some wilderness, being tested, your ears filled with whisperings, "You cannot do this. You aren't smart enough. Gifted enough. Where in the world will you get the money? Scale back. Be smart. Don't go that way. Why do things the hard way. Take the easier way..."

When we leave the banks of Jordan, we will face the thirst and hunger of the wilderness, those times that try our souls...

Count on it. When you become aware of some gift God has given you which often constitutes a calling, you will be led to a wilderness and tested as to how you will use that gift, how you will answer that calling. Will you use it for yourself, or for that of others and the kingdom of God?

I had a friend in college who was going to medical school because he felt a calling to become a medical missionary. It was a high time for him, a Jordan experience. I later learned from his letters from the wilderness about being tempted to join a lucrative practice in his hometown. He felt called to the service road but voices were whispering to him to come and try other paths. He did not listen to them.

In the story of Ulysses, remember when he is on his ship, trying to make his way home? He knows he will pass by the Isle of the Sirens, those voices sing out across the sea in such enticing tones that many sailors are led to their deaths on the jagged, rocky shores, never to see home or their destination. Ulysses commanded that his men put wax in their ears so they could not hear those voices and so be led to their destruction. But for himself, he was tied to the mast so that he could hear their singing. He commanded that none of his orders while hearing them were to be obeyed. The voices almost drive him mad until finally the ship passes by, the voices are stilled, and once more his ears are filled with the voices of his wife and son, with home, with his true destination.

So many voices crying out to us on this journey, telling us who to be, how to live, what to do. The noise is deafening sometimes. And the voices so sweet, so enticing, as they were for Jesus. Some seem to think the voice of Satan in the wilderness was like the hissing of a snake. I think not. It was more the singing of the Sirens, "Turn those stones into bread, Jesus. No need for you to be hungry. Surely using some of your power for yourself is okay. God doesn't want you to suffer, to be hungry. Just think how good that bread will taste...Imagine the world bowed before you...Imagine the people dazzled by your power...You would have the world in the palm of your hand...Just come to my shore...listen to me...follow my voice..."

But Jesus was able to resist the sirens song because he heard only another song, God's song ringing in his ears and stirring his heart. And he started singing back in a loud, strong voice to

that enticing voice..."We cannot live on bread alone...Worship the Lord your God and serve him only...Do not put the Lord your God to the test..." until that voice was drowned out! Silenced!

The wilderness is a tough place, even for Jesus. It took all the strength he had to make it through. How can we think it will be easy for us?

Thanks be to God, however, we are never alone in the wilderness journey. Jesus himself is the mast to which we are tied. In the midst of the sirens songs, he continues singing in our ears, assuring us we are on the right path, helping us through, for he's been there, done that. He's able to understand, to help guide us through it, even when we get lost, or fall flat on our faces, or begin giving in to those other voices. He does not give up on us or forsake us. We do not journey alone.

Discussion Questions

- A. Deut 26:1-11. Have you ever traced your family tree? What did you learn?
- B. What meals stand out in your memory? What did you learn about yourself from and through them?
- C. What do you find most meaning when you partake of Holy Communion?
- D. How do you help your children and grandchildren know who they are? What family traditions did you have and seek to continue?
- E. Who might you be leaving out or behind? Whose place at the table is empty? Are there places for unexpected guests?
- F. When you wish to show your thanks to God, how do you do it? Do you make tithes and offerings?
- G. Ps 91. Recall a time when you felt supremely secure. Where was it? Why did you feel that way?
- H. What does the word "shelter" mean to you? "Fortress"? "Refuge"?
- I. When and how have you most recently experienced the protective care of God?
- J. Romans 10:8b-13. If someone asked you, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" what would you say?
- K. How would you explain how someone becomes a Christian?
- L. Can you remember a time when you believed in your heart and confessed with your lips that Jesus was alive and was Lord?
- M. If you really meant that "Jesus is Lord," what changes might that mean for your life?
- N. Luke 4:1-13. When have you found yourself at the Jordan, filling empowered by the Spirit and affirmed as God's child?
- P. When have you sensed God calling you to take some path, or take on some ministry? Where you tested after I? How?
- Q. Where are you on this journey now:
Haven't started yet?
Just begun?
At the Jordan and loving it?
In the wilderness?

Sitting on the sidelines?

Lost?

Got your second wind?

Seeing the finish line?