

## Pillow or Paver Identity

1 Sunday in Lent C

March 5/6, 2022

Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

### **First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

*The annual harvest festival, called the Feast of Weeks, provides the setting for this reading. This festival celebrates the first fruits of the produce of the land offered back to God in thanks. In this text, worshipers announce God's gracious acts on behalf of Israel.*

<sup>1</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>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 the place where the name of God dwells. <sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>and the Lord brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.

### **Gospel: Luke 4:1-13**

*After being filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus is led in the wilderness. Through his responses to the temptations of the devil, he defines what it means to be called "the Son of God."*

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered the devil, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" <sup>5</sup>Then the devil led Jesus up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered the devil, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, the Lord alone shall you serve.'" <sup>9</sup>Then the devil took Jesus 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, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, 'God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>11</sup>and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" <sup>12</sup>Jesus answered the devil, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>13</sup>Having finished every test, the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

### **Introduction**

These 40 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.

### **Overview - An Identity on Which We Can Rely**

In Luke's gospel, the story of Jesus' temptation comes immediately after his baptism and a lengthy listing of his ancestors. Both help confirm the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. Now Jesus is led into the wilderness, where his identity is put to the test by the devil. The specific temptations are in some ways secondary to the question that introduces two of them. Twice the devil asks, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (Luke 4:3, 9), perhaps implying that the devil believes he knows better than Jesus what it means to be God's Son. But Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," is able to stand firm in his identity and deny the devil's attempts to redefine who he is. In our baptisms, we too are given the identity of God's child, and we are given the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our baptisms do not protect us from temptation, even as Jesus himself endured temptation. However, in our baptisms we are given an identity that can help us endure the temptations and the challenges that our lives are bound to include. Baptism gives us the confidence to trust that our identity is defined by our relationship to God, and not by anything else. In this confidence, we can accept our failures and shortcomings and live boldly in a manner that seeks to reflect Christ's own life.

### **Movie**

The Lenten season is often referred to as a pilgrimage or journey toward the cross. The practice of pilgrimage, which involves a journey to an unfamiliar place to grow in one's relationship with God, has connections to several faith traditions. The people of Ukraine are involved in such a great refugee pilgrimage – asking those questions of who we are, what can we take with us that is important and where shall we go? Lent for us is that exercise too.

### **Worship Service Element**

In Luke 4:1-13 the devil tempts Jesus to put himself 1<sup>st</sup> and to “feed” earthly wants/desires. In the test to turn a stone into bread, Jesus responds, “One does not live by bread alone.” This reference to bread reminds us of Jesus' words in Jn 6:35: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” A sermon idea might focus on the presence of Jesus in the meal of holy communion and on how it is not the bread itself, but Jesus' presence in that meal, which nurtures, sustains, and saves us.

### **Denominational Resource**

Women of the ELCA offers a resource called [“Lent: Penitence, Pilgrimage, Preparation,”](#) which invites readers to consider how Christians throughout history have observed the season of Lent while reflecting on their own spiritual renewal throughout the season. This resource is intended to be used by a group and includes opportunities for reflection, discussion, and practice.

### **Ritual**

To connect with the theme of Lent as a time for spiritual renewal, place the baptismal font in a location where worshipers have to walk by it in order to enter the worship space. Invite each person to dip their fingers in the water and mark themselves with the sign of the cross as they enter the worship space. If moving the baptismal font is not feasible, consider placing bowls of water at each entrance to the worship space for this purpose. If people are worshiping in their homes, invite them to fill a small bowl of water in preparation for worship and lead them in marking the sign of the cross on their foreheads at the beginning of worship.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**

Each year on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent we hear about Jesus being tested in the wilderness. In this way Jesus joined with us, who are also, one way or another, tested in some wilderness. We say Sundays “in” Lent, since when counting the 40 days of Lent, we omit the six Sundays, because Sunday is always a celebration of Christ's resurrection. So this Sunday we are both in Lent and beyond Lent. Each year, Lent begins with a synoptic account of the testing of Jesus. Jesus was truly human, suffering from the devil's temptations no less than we, and so he can stand by us when we are tested. We too are accompanied with the Spirit of God when we confront evil. Lent has traditionally been understood as a time to focus on resistance to evil.

### **[Luke 4:1-13](#)**

As we expect from Luke, the Spirit fills Jesus during his testing. Like Israel, Jesus is in the wilderness. Like Moses, Jesus is on a high mountain and fasts for 40 days and nights (Deut. 9:9). The temptation is presented as an eschatological moment, Jesus as Son of God confronting the devil. Jesus' responses come from Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:3, and 6:16. The narrative depicts Jesus' rejecting messiahship as a position of power. Instead, for Luke, the 3<sup>rd</sup> temptation is in Jerusalem, where Jesus' pinnacle will be on the cross, at the “opportune time.”

Luke has told us of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, of “a voice ... from heaven” ([3:22](#)) saying “You are my Son ...”. On that occasion “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form”, but is this what we today, living in an age with supposedly only one *reality*, would consider *bodily*? Ancient people conceived of several levels of *spirit worlds* with occasional contact between them and earth. Perhaps Jesus *transcends* between earth and a spirit world in the story of his testing by the devil. (Note the imaginative images in vv. [5](#) and [9](#).) During his time there (“forty days”, v. [2](#), meaning a significant period of time), the Holy Spirit sustains him in his travails; human as he is, Jesus is totally dependent on the Spirit being with him, for “he ate nothing”. (Moses ate nothing during the time he was on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments.) In this dependance, Jesus is humanly helpless; he humbles himself before the Father. The devil *speaks*, but is this like “a voice from heaven” speaking? The devil recognizes him as “Son of God” (vv. [3](#), [9](#)), the one who fulfills God's plan in creation and, given Luke's genealogy in [3:23-28](#), in Israel's history. Jesus answers the devil's questions with quotations from the Law, i.e. Deuteronomy, then considered to be the words of Moses. In v. [4](#) Jesus, hungry as he is, says: God sustains humans through other means than eating. Whether the devil has the authority to offer Jesus world-wide political power is unlikely (vv. [5-7](#)); however Jesus' answer is plain: God is the ultimate master; only he is to be worshipped (v. [8](#)). In vv. [9-11](#), the devil invites Jesus to do something extraordinary – a thing not in accordance with God's plan of salvation. Again Jesus refuses to be taken in (v. [12](#)). Jesus opposed the forces of evil throughout his ministry, but the greatest chance (“an opportune time”, v. [13](#)) the devil had was on the cross. There he again faces identified temptations.

### **[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#)**

The book of Deuteronomy, presented as Moses' final speech to the Israelites while still in the wilderness, was written sometime in the 7<sup>th</sup> century bce, it's authors are encouraging the Jews to remain faithful to the covenant,

despite the power of Assyria. The passage describes an offering of first fruits made to the priests at the temple and includes a creed that summarizes Israelite myth-history. The offering occurred at a festival, probably that of Unleavened Bread, that historicized the Canaanite celebration of the barley harvest. In keeping the covenant, the people are to worship God in gratitude. We now are like the Israelites, in the desert of Lent, awaiting our arrival at Easter, the land of milk and honey. Yet each Sunday in the bread and wine we are already sharing the food of the Promised Land. As the ancient Israelites united in a covenant creed, so in Lent we renew our baptismal creed, and in spite of testing, we celebrate God's bounty to us.

### **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

The book purports to be Moses' final speech to the Israelites before they cross into the Promised Land; however closer inspection shows that Deuteronomy is a reinterpretation of the Exodus legal tradition for a later generation, who now live a settled life. Exodus [23:19](#) and [34:26](#) say only: "The choicest/best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God." Our passage expands on this. The commandment here is highly specific: the *first fruits* are to be taken in a "basket" (v. [2](#)) to "the priest who is in office" (v. [3](#)): to a central location. Earlier, there were several shrines to God but now there is only one – at Jerusalem. Here the giving is linked to Israelite history: God swore to Abraham ("ancestors", v. [3](#)) to give the Promised Land to Israel. Jacob, the "wandering Aramean" (v. [5](#)), and his children moved to Egypt in a time of famine. There they multiplied, were oppressed and enslaved. When they prayed to God to help them, he used his power to free them. Note v. [9](#): no longer are they "wandering" semi-nomads; now they live in a prosperous "land flowing with milk and honey". In thanks for God's gift of both the land and abundant crops, Israelites are to give produce to God (v. [10](#)); in recognition of his sovereignty over the land, they are to prostrate themselves ("bow down") before him. God's gifts are cause for celebration by Israelites and foreigners ("aliens", v. [11](#)) who live in Palestine.

### **Images in the Readings**

Luke writes that Jesus was tested for **40 days and 40 nights**. In the Bible, 40 is always the time between, the necessary span before the gracious conclusion. It is 40, days or years, that numbers the rain of Noah's flood, Moses on Mount Sinai, Israel in the wilderness, the spies scouting out Canaan, Israel in the hands of the Philistines, the taunting by Goliath, the reign of Saul, David, and Solomon, Elijah going to Mt. Horeb, Ezekiel lying on his right side, Nineveh's repentance, and Jesus' appearance after Easter. For us, it is 40 days until the resurrection—since the church does not count Sundays as time in the wilderness.

The gospel reading describes the **devil** as the tempter, the power that seeks to lure us away from God by throwing obstacles in our path. The tradition of art has not given us profound enough depictions of this primordial evil, but the devil is the opposite reality of the angels, who protect the faithful. Jews developed a belief in the devil as the source of evil from their contact with especially the Zoroastrians, for whom the powers of good and of evil were in perpetual conflict. For Jews and Christians, evil is never an equal power to God.

The idea of presenting **first fruits** in gratitude to God develops over Israelite history into an obligation that supports the temple priests. A parallel in Canaanite practice was to offer one's firstborn child to the deities. Many Christians continue to speak of their monetary offerings as first fruits, for some the first 10 percent of one's earnings. Lent has traditionally been a time to encourage alms-giving, since Christians recognize that giving to the needy is how the faithful give to God.

### **Connections with the Liturgy**

In the Lord's Prayer, we recall the testing of Jesus when we pray that God "save us from the time of trial." We pray to be saved from tests that we will fail.

### **Life on the Earth**

The first reading situates us on this earth: a land that produces foodstuffs, a place of deserts, but also of abundance, "flowing with milk and honey." Ancient Israelites did not imagine a life after death outside this world: if we listen to this ancient creed, it is on this earth that we are to celebrate the bounty of the Lord our God.

*(Highlighted portions are direct quotes re: ideas that have long been doctrinally present but often not taught/communicated well by clergy, Sunday school teachers or parents leading to generational misunderstandings and even contemporary mythology; Spiritual warfare, understandings of a life after death and our understandings of Satan are examples -esp. relevant to today's texts. Thanks to Sundays&Seasons.com; MinistryMatters.com; WorkingPreacher.org; Montreal.Anglican.org)*

### **Thoughts from the Texts:**

- 1) **Luke:** Jesus is able to have his thinking, behavior and approach to life tested because his identity foundation is secure. He can resist very alluring and seductive temptations not because he knows the scriptures so well but because he trusts that God's care and relationship with him will produce something better in the long run. The temptations themselves might give him something that is good and that he wants in the short run. The focus though is the long run of who he will be, how his identity is shaped, confirmed and improved and

who/what God is doing in and through him. While Jesus is able to resist all the temptations that come to him – we often are not. Instead of beating ourselves up and feeling excessively guilty, ashamed and depressed, what positive growth piece or experience can we take away from this? Can we see that the experiences of resisting temptation help us focus more and more on what matters most, on who we really are and want to be, and what role having our identity placed squarely on our relationship with God provides for us? Like muscles, the more we practice resistance the more we can deeply rely on our relationship with God and experience the inner strength and satisfaction our connection with God provides.

- 2) **Deuteronomy**: AFTER the people have come to an awareness, ownership and connection to the blessings from God that is their land, they are directed to provide a thank offering and celebrate these blessings (and that God is the source that has given them) with everyone (including “aliens”- outsiders) in their midst. How do you respond to the idea that one reason offerings from church people are so proportionately low (on average, church people give at about a 1.6% level to kingdom causes; whereas self-defined atheists are often measured at a slightly higher level of overall charitable giving – 1.8%; compare all of this to the biblical tithe [1<sup>st</sup> fruits, 1<sup>st</sup> gifts, 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the overall; etc.) is that they have not come to a full, daily sense of AWARENESS, OWNERSHIP or CONNECTION that all of their blessings come from God – who they are, the abilities and gifts they have, use and enjoy, their ability to earn a living, buy/rent a home, have food in the pantry, and participate as partners with God in the kingdom work that is available to them? Many think I work hard at my job; I deserve the money I get and the things I can buy, etc. OR I worked hard therefore I’ve earned my position, degrees, accolades, titles, popularity, etc. What needs to take place or happen for people to see that all of this comes from God and is to be managed well including enjoying its benefits, yes! And also partnering with God up to God’s expectation of a tithe, seeing/reaping the benefits of what this can do in the world and celebrating that God is the ongoing source of these blessings and has given us a partnering Promise for life and beyond? How do this work for you? Is your level of giving matching your faith or is it what is given after the real bills are taken care of.....do you have a Standard of Giving from your faith or is your faith determined by your Standard of Living? (WARNING: Only try moving to a Tithe level over time; novices at this spiritual practice often get discouraged because they make a big jump to 10% giving and expect some immediate spiritual occurrence and then get frustrated. Go 1 step at a time.....only increase 1% over what you are doing until you have begun to experience the blessings that come from giving a little bit more like God gives (this is often felt as a shift in how you see things of value in your life). Only then will this be a true spiritual exercise and something more than a get faithful quick scheme – then you can keep increasing to a full tithe – whatever % that may be for you!!)