

Sunday, February 14, 2016
Sermon – “Feast and Fasting”
Scripture Readings – Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13
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We are delighted to present a portion of Handel’s *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Lent. Today we begin our Lenten journey with “Behold the Lamb of God.” Handel uses the words John spoke when he saw Jesus, connecting Christ to the sacrificial lamb offered at Passover. Yet the lamb was not the only offering to God given by the ancient Israelites. They also offered the fruits of the grounds in gratitude for God’s abundant blessings, and in our first reading today, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Moses instructs the people in this ritual of thanksgiving. Hear now God’s holy Word.

1 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, 2 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 the Lord 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.

Our second reading today is Luke 4:1-13. Jesus has just come from his baptism, and is about to begin his ministry. But first, he spends forty days alone in the desert. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 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.' " 5 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 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, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: "Feast and Fasting"

Text: "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." Luke 4:1-2

Let us pray: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this feast, that it may nourish us today. And may the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Over the past week or so, I've been getting requests from the youth in varying degrees of panic for guidance on what they should give up for Lent. Between the Bay Weekend and the Super Bowl, I've only had enough time to assure them we will talk about it in youth group this weekend and to throw them a standard, "any way, we're Protestant—it doesn't matter!" But it is a question that comes up, even for us Protestants, as we enter the season of Lent. Even in my hometown full of self-declared atheists and agnostics, EVERYONE talked about what they were giving up for Lent. It often becomes a sort of second chance at New Year's resolutions—X-TREME Lent! What could you challenge yourself to go 40 days without? What limits could you push yourself to? —completely disconnected from any spiritual self-reflection, and all about achievement and accomplishment.

I was never any good at giving things up for Lent, in any case. The only year I really focused on a Lenten discipline was in 6th grade, when I gave up gossiping. It sounds impressive, but at that point in my life I didn't talk—hard as that might be to believe. So it wasn't exactly difficult. Mostly I just managed to sound painfully virtuous whenever anyone asked what I had given up.

But then in college, the chaplain's office decided to focus on issues of food justice and scarcity during Lent, with the option of participating in a week long fast at the end of the season, culminating in a communion service and meal together. I jumped in whole-heartedly. We worked through Lent to raise money and goods for local food pantries and visited and worked in community gardens throughout LA. And every Saturday we refrained from eating, in preparation for our coming fast.

Some were planning on fasting from sun up to sun down. Some planned on consuming only smoothies. Others chose to eat one meal in the middle of each of the seven days. I went all in. Eight days, clear liquids only. The first day was kind of fun and exciting. The second day was harder. The third day was terrible. On day four, though, things turned around. I wasn't hungry anymore, and I felt newly energized, proud of myself for being a day ahead of everyone else. On day five, I started to feel an odd sensation in my arms and legs. It felt so familiar, but I just couldn't place it. On the sixth day, I figured it out: that sensation was hunger. My stomach was perfectly happy. But my arms and legs were hungry. I spent most of day seven weeping. On day eight, I laughed with joy when I tasted food.

It was difficult. It was intense. I was so pleased with myself, so excited, and I couldn't wait to do it again the next year. But I haven't fasted since. Because as I thought about that experience, I came to realize that food and eating do not lead me away from God—instead, my great temptation, the

great division between me and God, was my drive for perfection, my desire to be the best at fasting, the frightening pride in controlling my body's needs.

One of my favorite things about Jesus is how he is always eating. He invites himself over for dinner, he invites others over for dinner, he constantly uses images of food and feasts in his teachings, and his central act that we remember month after month was around a dinner table. On the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us, his disciples recognized the resurrected Christ when he broke bread with them. The guy is ALL about food.

But in today's text, he goes without. And it doesn't seem to be his choice. Luke tells us he was DRIVEN OUT into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, and ate nothing while he was there. This language of being driven out seems to suggest that he didn't eat mostly because he wasn't given the chance to pack. And at the end of these forty days he is famished.

I find this so reassuring. Forty days of fasting isn't no big deal to Jesus—he has a human body, and he gets HUNGRY. Now, he handles it better than we would. According to Sarah, Trajan would sell out humanity for a Snickers bar after about a day without eating. But still, he is **hungry** when the devil shows up and puts him through three tests. The first—to change stone into bread—is to tempt Jesus into exerting power over nature to suit his own wants. Change the natural world unnaturally for the sake of your own consumption, the devil says. And Christ refuses. The second—to bow before the devil, who holds all earthly power—is to tempt Jesus into exerting power over humans. Worship me, the devil says, and you will have all political power and authority. And Christ refuses. The third test is more complicated. In the third, the devil tempts Jesus into exerting power over God. You think God loves you, that little voice whispers—make God prove it. Make God save you. And Christ refuses. Power over nature, power over humans, and power over God. These are the temptations Christ rejects.

But there is another test, one underlying these three. “If you are the Son of God,” the devil says. IF you are the Son of God, do these things. Are you sure you're the Son of God? Prove it. Jesus has just come from his baptism, in which the sky opened and the Spirit descended and he was claimed and named as God's Beloved Son. More than tempting a hungry Jesus with a loaf of bread, the devil tempts him with doubt about who he is. If you are the Son of God! The devil whispers that voice we know so well, the one that tells us we are not loved, that we are not God's own. And it is in that whisper, building on the fear and loneliness of not knowing whose you are, that the devil offers his three temptations. And as much as this hungry Jesus is human, he is also God. And so he resists. He knows who he is, and so he leaves the wilderness, ready to begin his ministry.

But we are only human. And we often cannot resist. So I invite you to close your eyes, and empty your hands. We're going to explore the places where we are tested, just as Jesus was. Breathe in the assurance of God's presence, and breathe out any worries or distractions. Now—what voice whispers to you the fear that you are not God's beloved? In what way do you try to control nature to prove this voice wrong? What resource do you consume beyond your need to prove to this voice that you are worthy? What voice whispers to you the fear that you are not God's beloved? In what way do you try to control other people to prove this voice wrong? How do you keep others from knowing themselves as God's beloved? What voice whispers to you the fear that you are not God's beloved? In what way do you try to control God to prove this voice wrong? What bargains do you try to strike? What limits do you place on the Holy One? What voice whispers to you the fear that you are not God's beloved? I invite you to open your eyes again.

Friends, we are all God's beloved. We are chosen, forgiven, and loved. But so often we are afraid that we are forgotten, worthless, and will never be good enough. My eight day fast became an achievement, an accomplishment, something to prove to God that I was deserving because I was better than anyone else at something. Maybe a more fruitful Lenten practice is not the perfection of self-denial, but rather the setting aside of time to pray and reflect on the ways we act out of our fear and try to control the world and people around us. Maybe a healthier Lenten practice is to try to turn away from controlling the world, others, and ourselves and to try to live into the trust that we are God's beloved, exactly as we are. This is not easy. How much easier to give up chocolate, or gossiping, or even eight days of food.

We are here in the wilderness, at the beginning of our forty days, confronted with the voice that whispers doubt and tempts us into fear and insecurity. The Israelites knew something of fear and insecurity and wilderness wandering. Forty years they were lost, constantly questioning their identity as God's chosen, constantly trying to exert power in their fear. Our reading today comes from the end of those forty years, from the final speech Moses gives. They are not yet out of the wilderness, but they stand looking into the Promised Land. And so assured are they that their time of fear and fasting is over, so assured are they of the abundant feasts God will provide, that Moses instructs them on what to do with their bounty and their gratitude.

We may be setting out on our own wandering in the wilderness. Some of us may have been out here for a long time already. There is a long and hard journey ahead of us before we get to the resurrection. But we are assured of the abundance of God's love, and of all the possibility of that love.

And so we come to the table, where there is no need to change a stone to bread or to prove ourselves worthy through relentless self-perfection and control, for Christ gives abundantly to all. We come to this table, to this feast, where Christ is revealed to us in the breaking of bread, and where we are strengthened in the knowledge of ourselves as God's beloved so that we might go out in service of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.