Westminster Meditation – "A Modest Proposal"
Sunday, March 9, 2025
Scripture Reading – Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13
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Our first scripture reading is Deuteronomy 26:1-11. The setting is a festival at the conclusion of the harvest of grains. The thank offerings of grain from the first fruit of the harvest include a litany of Israel's history. Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah and understands the importance of memory. Not only does memory allow each generation to relive God's redemption from the past, but it also forms their identity as God's people and renews their gratitude for God's mercy in their own lives. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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 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 God 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.

The Christian faith is also based on the collective memory of the people of Christ. Each year we begin the season of Lent, remembering Jesus' temptation in the wilderness following his baptism. Our second scripture reading is Luke 4:1-13. Luke closely connects the temptations of Jesus with his identity as the Son of God. Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying.

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. 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.'" 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 God.'" 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, 'God will command God's angels concerning you, to protect you,' 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. Amen.

The title of the meditation: "A Modest Proposal"

Text: The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Luke 13:4

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, speak to us with tenderness that we may be strengthened for the temptations we encounter. Give us the grace to accept our humanity and to honor the humanity of others. We ask this in the name of the One who sympathizes with our weaknesses and joined us in our humanity. Amen.

In 1729, Jonathan Swift wrote the satiric essay, A Modest Proposal, published in pamphlet form to influence compassion for the starving Irish. The satire ridiculed the British politicians, elites, and landowners who did not see the poor Irish as a problem of human misery and suffering, but rather as an inconvenience. The ridiculous proposal that the poor Irish could sell their babies as expensive delicacies to satisfy the appetites of the rich shed light on how the rich dehumanize the poor. The hope of satire is for people to see the error and excesses of their ways more clearly and change for the good.

The dehumanization of the poor today is in full view with the 90% cut of USAID to reduce government spending and offset the reduction of taxes for the richest Americans. This modest proposal of cutting less than one third of one percent of our $6.8 trillion dollar annual federal spending is costing the lives of the poor around the world and inflicting unnecessary pain, illness, and suffering on our fellow human beings.

Satire can also be found in parables told by biblical prophets and Christ. The prophet Nathan helped David see the error of his ways more clearly. and Christ gently presents our reflection in a mirror through stories and satire in the hope we will change for the good.

At a closer look of Jesus' interaction with his Tempter, we see satire in the modest proposals presented. Theologians have interpreted the meaning of Christ's temptations over the years. Twentieth century theologian William Barclay, in his commentary on Luke, suggests the first temptation is the sin of materialism, the second is the sin of compromise, and the third is the sin of sensationalism.

In the early years of my faith development, the teachings of Barclay were my bread and butter; however, as I tasted more of life, I found this interpretation too simplistic. Why?

Not all materialism is sin. We all know those who are rich in things and poor in spirit; however, we also know how the generosity of people with material goods can enrich the lives of many and contribute to the kingdom of God.

Not all compromise is sin. Give and take is a necessary part of healthy relationships. Sometimes people compromise too much and lose themselves; however, compromise is an art form and a sign of maturity. We need a little more compromise in the world at large.

Not all sensationalism is sin. A spectacular sunset can fill our senses and deepen our gratitude for the Creator. However, when sensationalism is used to manipulate the truth, this is wrong. It is true that all these things (materialism, compromise, and sensationalism) are misused by human beings; however, they are not sins in and of themselves.

What each temptation has in common is the appeal to escape one's humanity…the journey of life which we celebrate also takes us down roads we find unbearable and through life's transitions and losses which at times overwhelm us. We need not be surprised that Christ's temptations occur in the wilderness. These are the times we are especially vulnerable to opportunities for escapism.

What stands out for me is the nature of the temptations which confront Christ. In many ways they are "modest proposals." If someone asked you to command a stone to become bread, would you be tempted to do so? Neither would I for the same reason. It is not humanly possible.

Satan is tempting Christ to be God…at his lowest, most vulnerable place on his human journey, hungry and exhausted, Jesus is given the opportunity to escape this "God-awful" human experience and become who he is and who he had the power to be…God.

However, the whole purpose of Christ's incarnation is to become one of us and to be with us --- Emmanuel means "God with us." Jesus came to experience both the height of our joys and the depth of our anguish without abandoning us, so we can be confident that wherever life take us we do not walk alone.

Christ came to join us in our humanity and when the going got tough and the temptation was there, he did not retreat into being God. He did not in the wilderness, he did not in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he did not on the cross. Jesus stays with us, as one of us, even unto death.

Unlike Christ, you and I cannot always endure the human experience. The temptation to escape and to pretend we are like God is enormous. Some may retreat to excessive materialism, self-destructive compromise, or provocative sensationalism. The ironic tragedy is that we often experience more pain when we succumb to escape rather than walking through the valley and wilderness before us.

All God really asks of us is to be human, embrace our humanity, accept our limitations and weaknesses, and rather than dehumanize those that suffer, have mercy, share and comfort one other along the way of life.

"A modest proposal…really!" Amen.

<u>Words spoken during Communion:</u>
Though Christ refused to turn stones into bread, he faithfully fed the hungry. Though Christ refused the compromise of political power, he proclaimed God's empire of justice and peace. Though Christ refused the sensationalism of jumping off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross confident God's commitment to resurrection will uphold him despite the world's decision to unjustly execute him.