

First Sunday in Lent  
St. Ann's Church, Old Lyme, CT  
February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16  
Romans 10:8b-13  
Luke 4:1-13

***SERMON:***

The readings for this First Sunday in Lent set the tone for us in our spiritual lives for this season. Lent is a serious season—not a downer—a blessed opportunity for us to take stock of our lives, adjust and reorganize those aspects that are out of tune with righteousness. To put it crassly, Lent is our 30,000-mile check, our annual physical for our souls.

The first lesson, the reading from Deuteronomy is one of scripture's classic examples of sacrificial giving—giving back to God a portion of what God has already given us. Lent, this season of the church year that we moved into last week on Ash Wednesday, takes as its primary focus this understanding of sacrificial giving—giving back to God a portion of all that God has given us. We misunderstand what Lent is all about if all we think of it as giving up something for our benefit—be it a giving up of something spiritual or physical. The point of Lent's discipline is giving back not giving up—giving back to God a portion of what God has already given us.

The lesson we heard from Deuteronomy reminds us who the prime and primary giver really is. God has already been there. It is God who is the first giver. Understood this way, then, anything that I give to God, any contribution of my own is a return, a response or reaction to that which has already been done for me and given to me by God.

The people of Israel offer thanks to God for the gift of their holy land, but it isn't theirs. It is God's space and place given to the people to be stewards over in God's behalf.

In Lent we prepare for our great offering of thanks to God in our Easter celebrations. We give thanks to God not so much for the tangible, material gift of a holy land, but rather the spiritual blessings of forgiveness, grace, and mercy. During Lent we focus on asking God for that which has already been given us. As is always the case, God is there ahead of us, one step or more ahead of us, anticipating our needs and desires.

Paul carries this same theme out in the reading we heard from his letter to the congregations in Rome. Righteous, salvation, has its own requirements, he explains, but it is always in response to what God has already done, specifically in Christ. Our righteousness, our salvation is not of our own doing or a result of our actions. We have received a gift from God.

God did not ask us to bring about Christ's resurrection. That was done for us. All that is asked of us is to accept in faith that which God has already accomplished. God has been there and done that. We are to live our lives faithfully and thankfully for all that God has done for us.

That, then, brings us to the Gospel reading for this morning. Jesus confronts the basic sin that we all confront, unrighteousness, turning away from God and toward the enemy. Jesus confronts temptation and turns towards God and God's gifts. Jesus obeys. Jesus is faithful.

Righteousness—living in accordance with God's will for us—asks that we respond to God's grace and mercy with thanksgiving in the way we live our lives.

If we live our lives according to the will of God we will not necessarily have the abundance of turning rocks into bread, satiating and satisfying our carnal appetites.

We won't necessarily have power enough to rule the nations of the world, or even power enough to rule those around us.

There will be no guarantees that if we do stupid and risky things, we won't pay a physical and mental price for actions that are self-centered and self-destructive.

A life characterized as a life lived in accord with the will of God will not necessarily be that abundant life that our all-too-commercial culture would have us think is available to us for the cost of a bottle of perfume or a blend of organic vitamins and minerals.

We are promised abundant life of the kind that God has promised us, and it is left up to us, as it was left up to Jesus, to choose: life abundant according to the description offered by the world—life abundant of the kind promised by God.

Temptation is so very, very tempting. It always looks just like what's the best for us.

When tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the snake didn't ask, "Don't you wish you were like the devil?" The tempter's question to them was the identical to his question to Jesus and to us, "Wouldn't you like to be God?"

"If you are really the Son of God," says Jesus' tempter. No outright offers of debauchery and lewd, lascivious or wild, wild living, and great riches. Rather, the tempter offers the ultimate in upward mobility, the opportunity to replace God. No self-respecting devil would approach us with offers of personal, domestic, or social ruin. We are quite capable of achieving all those on our own.

Real temptation is so very deceptive. That is what makes it so insidious. Suspicious looking strangers hardly ever lead us astray. It's close friends and relatives that break down our trust barriers. Bernie Madof didn't earn the trust of his investors because he had horns sticking out through the brim of his fedora or a tail poking out from the vent of his chesterfield overcoat. Bernie Madof looked like everyone's successful uncle. The sin that is offered looks good—it is tempting.

The Tempter was offering Jesus the opportunity to do some good things. Turn stones into bread—satisfy his hunger and feed the hungry, lead the nations of the world in peace and prosperity. What the Tempter was trying to do was to get Jesus to do it his way rather than God's way.

We all must be aware, alert: assure me of the good life, of power and prestige—promise that risk is reduced and security and safety is at hand—how long would it take me to succumb to the temptations and risk the possibility of being God.

So Jesus leads us into Lent and into life—real life, life lived in thanksgiving to God for all the gifts we have been given. Jesus shows how to trust in God and rely on the final outcome of our faith. We learn that we cannot trust in our self-serving methods of security. We learn that our real security comes from trusting in the goodness, generosity, and mercy of God.

Jesus shows us that our inclination to be served by others, to be the top of the heap, is ultimately defeating because we are, in fact, attempting to replace God, to be like God, to have power over others.

1<sup>st</sup> Lent—St. Ann's  
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Jesus calls us into service to others, not power over others. Lent is the opportunity to be led by Jesus to an understanding of God's grace and mercy—to really and truly respond to God's generosity

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