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IN THE WILDERNESS

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Text of a Sermon preached the First Sunday of Lent
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DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 | PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16
ROMANS 10:8B-13 | LUKE 4:1-13

In this new era of global struggle between nation states, the most serious challenge to human wellbeing and human betterment on this planet since World War II, in the face of the knowledge that we have the means to destroy ourselves as a species and a planet many times over, it is well to take a step back and consider what a miracle it is that we are still here.

The next breath we take is a witness to how far we have come, that there is even a thing called the rule of law, self determination, the

ideal of liberal democracy, flawed and unrealized as it is, that is result of many different souls who read these Scriptures we have heard today, and who lived out the implications of the covenant that God made with the people of Israel three thousand years ago.

May the next breath we take be a witness to how far we have to go. Today's lesson is that we, like Jesus, like the people of Israel before him, should learn to gladly accept God's testing, his challenges for us, and steadfastly refuse to test God or ignore the covenant he has made with us.

So let us see the great wisdom of starting out the first Sunday of Lent, embarking on our journey of repentance and self discovery with Jesus in the wilderness, and with a passage from the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy. What have we just heard? It seems to skip over the trials and temptations, the disobedient and rebellion of an often lost people, and marks a story of fulfillment, a celebration. All we need to recall is that Moses is, even here, at this moment, still in the wilderness.

That is the genius of the story. And the other thing it ought to remind us of is that every last word Jesus says to the devil in the wilderness comes from the testament of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is composed of three long sermons Moses gives to the people while still in the desert to prepare them for entering into the Promised Land. In a masterful commentary written just before his death in 2020, Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England for many years, claims that the book of Deuteronomy is none other than the fountainhead of Western personal and social ethics, including the idea of covenantal and constitutional ordering of society.

Rabbi Sacks notes that key to understanding these final words of encouragement and warning rests in two words he uses over and over. Shema - Hear O Israel - and Zakar - Remember O Israelite - who you are and whose you are.

In the Shema - Hear O Israel the Lord you God is one - Moses tell us that no one will force us to obey, we are instead to take responsibility for understanding what has happened to us and what has been given us. We are to always listen, and by listening, hear, which leads to our glad willingness to obey.

In the same way, we are to remember, Zakar, calling to mind what we have heard, because we have willingly agreed to take responsibility for one another. We do this by regularly remembering the basic story: “My father” - not your father, not their father - “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

All we need to do is remember this story of deliverance from slavery and we immediately are transformed back to being people who care for one another and for the oppressed, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant in our midst. We are asked not to remember out of sheer duty, but with joy, gladly sharing our first fruits of the land. So the journey may continue.

Indeed, earlier, in his first sermon in chapter eight, Moses begins by explaining to them WHY they have been in the wilderness. ““THIS entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

The people of Israel had a different experience of desert, of wilderness, than many other cultures. One of the most interesting words in Hebrew is the word ‘desert’ or ‘wilderness’. It does not mean an empty or barren or solitary place, as it means in Greek. Not at all. The word for ‘word’ in Hebrew is ‘dabar.’

The word for 'desert' is 'middabar.' It means 'place of speech.' The place where a voice is heard.

Jesus discovers this as well. As Jesus, hungrier than any of us has ever been, believes that he does not live by bread alone, believes that we are to worship and serve God alone, and finally, sees that the most important test is at the pinnacle of the temple. I started out this reflection with the notion that we ought to be radically grateful that we are even here. Do you see that the meaning of the devils final test of Jesus is the possibility that Jesus will fail, that he will disappear from history, that his life will amount to nothing?

Jesus is learning that he will have to choose to embrace his full humanity, which includes being dashed to the ground. To rule all kingdoms is nothing compared to being disgraced and forgotten, banished to non-existence. We often skip over this part, because we do often, in subtle ways, tempt God, tempt fate. Jesus will choose to embrace complete vulnerability and shame to teach us that we must not be afraid of death.

Is it possible, at this moment in our journey with God, this moment in history, we too must choose our full humanity – and choose for the sake of others, emptiness over fullness, obscurity over honor, vulnerability over rescue, moral strength and purpose, over might makes right.

I invite you to be joyfully put to the test by God, rather than to put God to the test. And trust that all who call upon the name of the Lord will indeed be saved.

God tests us in order to know what is in our heart, to find out who we are, and to find out if we will trust him. As you see, here in the wilderness, everything depends upon it.