

Lent 1: Episcopal Relief & Development Sermon Notes

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Possession of the land. How many conflicts have started over possession? How many lives have been lost because of the land? How is one to understand when the land quakes, betrays and destroys a whole nation like Haiti? And yet the text tells us that that God has given the land as an inheritance. It can be tempting to reinterpret and spiritualize “the land,” turning it into a metaphor of rootedness or security and thereby skirting the contentious place that it holds in the Middle East today. While this strategy might be advantageous at one level, it tends to distort the deeply incarnational nature of our Christian faith. The passage is clear: The land is a divine gift and a symbol of the people’s covenant with God.

With the Christmas season not so far behind us, we all know a little something about gifts and giftedness. Many of us in this North American context have been gifted with numerous possessions and inheritances. Often we claim these gifts as possessions and do not reflect on their divine origin. It is God who has gifted us with everything that we “possess.” These gifts have been given to, and are meant to keep giving. This is clear in today’s text.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, God instructs the people to look after the other—“the aliens who reside among you.” God gave the land as an inheritance to the people that they might use it as a gift for others. In this season of Lent, where are the aliens in your life who God has asked you to “celebrate with”? What gifts can you share with others? Episcopal Relief & Development exists to allow you to share the gifts God has given you with others, whether they dwell in the land with you or farther afield.

Romans 10:8b-13

The ubiquity of the cell phone means that many of us frequently find ourselves calling—calling our loved ones, our friends or maybe a cab. When was the last time you called God asking for salvation? This kind of language often makes us Episcopalians uncomfortable. And yet, St. Paul is clearly telling us that the word of salvation is on our lips and in our hearts, and that all we need to do to be saved is to “call upon the name of the Lord.”

I do not know about you, but I do not often find myself thinking about or calling out for salvation. If I have a problem, I marshal whatever resources I need. I use my credit card. I call my friends. I call in favors. These are ways that I solve problems, but does problem-solving equal salvation? What is salvation? Is it deliverance of the soul from eternal damnation? Is it, as liberation theology maintains, holistic liberation from oppressive systems—natural and supernatural?

Perhaps salvation is deliverance from our own narcissistic and selfish ways. Perhaps salvation lies in turning attention away from ourselves and directing it to God and to the needs of our neighbors. Regardless of how one presents salvation, it is clear that salvation is rooted in community, as the scriptural image of the Kingdom of God demonstrates.

St. Paul is right: The word of salvation is on our lips—but not only on our lips but in our lives—as we intentionally look to God and to the needs of others. As we pray morning by morning in the *Great Thanksgiving*, “that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with lips, but in our lives, by giving ourselves up for your service.” During Lent and throughout the year, may we remember the needs of those who suffer oppression and deprivation through corrupt governments, through lack of food and clean water and through our own neglect. The

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Body of Christ is a global body and must be attuned to itself—lest cancer grow. Once a member of the body suffers, like our brothers and sisters in Haiti, we all suffer.

Luke 4:1-13

Have you ever chosen to give something up? No, I am not talking about sacrificing your place in line or giving up meat on Fridays or chocolate during Lent. Those are good spiritual disciplines, but they seem ineffectual when compared to Christ's deliberate relinquishment during his 40 days in the desert. Have you ever deliberately chosen to let go of your privilege? Your power? Your rights?

Isn't that precisely the point of Luke's narrative of Jesus' temptation? In the reading, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he deliberately gives up his power, his privilege, his rights. The Son of God embraces his humanity—choosing not to alter the natural order by making bread from stones or by calling upon a heavenly host.

Jesus presents us with an example of living within our means. As environmental resources are rapidly depleted and as consumer indebtedness continually rises, Jesus demonstrates how to fight the temptation to exceed our means. He teaches us that we can live with less. In learning to live simply, we learn to become more like Christ.

This Lent may we join in the singing and dancing of the Shaker hymn:

*'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.*

—from "Simple Gifts" by Elder Joseph Brackett, Jr., Hymn 554, The Hymnal 1982

May we live simply, so that others may simply live.

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