

First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Psalms 91:1–2, 9–16

Romans 10:8b–13

Luke 4:1–13

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

¹When 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, ²you 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 his name. ³You 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.” ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you 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. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The 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; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Then 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.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Throughout the Pentateuch, sacred story and law are closely interwoven. After the primordial havoc of the flood, Noah emerges from the ark to build an altar; his ritual offering secures a commitment from God never again to destroy every living creature (Gen. 8:20–22). When the Israelites struggle their way through the wilderness to Sinai, they consecrate themselves (Exod. 19:10–15) to meet a dangerous Lawgiver who descends upon the mountain in thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, with “a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (vv. 16–25). The magnificent remembrance literature of Deuteronomy offers a theological “history” of ancient Israel rich with ritual and juridical practices, forming

a people whose polity and cultic observance are narrated as the core of covenantal relation.

In Deuteronomy 26, the offering of firstfruits is grounded in a larger narrative that claims God has ordained the conquest of Canaan by Israel. The territory on the far side of the Jordan is described not as the home of the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 7:1; cf. 20:17), but as “the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (26:1–3). The Israelites are to become sovereign over this territory through extermination or subjugation of the indigenous inhabitants—the project, literally and rhetorically, of the book of Joshua. The Christian preacher should be mindful of the three verses preceding our passage.

Anomalous in a context of case laws about internecine disputes and economic equity, these verses just prior to our lection (25:17–19) serve to fan enmity against a hated antagonist of Israel. Israel is exhorted never to forget the savage attack they suffered at the hands of the Amalekites, indigenes portrayed as scurrilous (“undeterred by the fear of God,” v. 18 NJPS) in their assault on Israelites “famished and weary.” The image of Amalek ruthlessly picking off the weak and those “who lagged behind” (v. 18) may be meant to evoke the predatory Arabian wolf or lion, a rhetorical move that would surely have catalyzed a fearful and aggressive response in the implied audience. While rhetoric about obliterating Canaanites is not foregrounded in our passage as such, the larger conquest narrative in which 26:1–11 is embedded must be handled with care by the preacher.

The Talmud tractate dealing with firstfruits, *Bikkurim*, discusses legal classifications of various “seed” offerings, who may bring the offering, and who should say the declaration. From other citations in rabbinic literature, we may surmise that the ritual of offering firstfruits was richly resonant for ancient Jewish worshipers. Jeffrey Tigay notes that the Dead Sea scroll known as the Temple Scroll (11QT) “prescribes that the first barley, wheat, wine, and oil be brought on different dates, at fifty-day intervals,” and that, according to *Bikkurim*, “in the late Second Temple period farmers . . . would come in groups made up of people from towns in the same region. They traveled in a festive procession, led by a flute player and an ox with gilded horns and an olive wreath, and were welcomed by officials outside Jerusalem.”¹

A Sign unto This Nation

The Lord has made me a sign unto this nation, an’ I go round a’testifyin’, an’ showin’ their sins agin my people. My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa’n’t goin’ to keep nothin’ of Egypt on me, an’ so I went to the Lord an’ asked him to give me a new name. An’ the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an’ down the land, showin’ the people their sins, an’ bein’ a sign unto them. Afterword I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the Truth to the people. . . . I journeys round to camp meetin’s, an’ wherever folks is, an’ I sets up my banner, an’ then I sings, an’ then folks always come up round me, an’ then I preaches to ‘em. I tells ‘em about Jesus, an’ I tells ‘em about the sins of this people.

Sojourner Truth, “The Lord Has Made Me a Sign,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 11 (April 1863), 473, 478.

In Deuteronomy 26:5, the unusual way of describing Israel’s origin, “My father was a wandering Aramean” (*’arammi ’oved ’avi*), has drawn scholarly attention for many centuries. Both the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua narrate “Israel” as a group that came as landless outsiders to the territory on which they settle. The ritual declaration in the firstfruits ceremony inscribes that foreignness via the demonym “Aramean,” one from the region of Aram² in what has become modern-day Syria and southeastern Turkey. The modifier *’oved* may be translated as “wandering,” but we should not imagine a purposeless traversing of terrain. The term could signify a journey or, alternatively, the nomadic or seminomadic movement of agriculturalists pasturing herds over great distances. Other meanings using that Hebrew root include losing one’s way, going astray, and being a fugitive. Thus the semantic possibilities range from the traditional NRSV version to the striking formulation of Louis Stulman: “My father was a Syrian refugee.” As Stulman observes, “The confession . . . refuses to suppress language of loss, trauma,

1. Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 239.

2. The Arameans were not a unified people but, rather, a diverse group of tribes and states spread across the Levant and southern Mesopotamia. See K. Lawson Younger Jr., “Aram and the Arameans,” in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2016), 229–65.

and marginality. Instead it makes the nation's hardships part of its public narrative."³

Who, then, is meant by "my father" (*'avi*)? Abraham could be the referent, as the originary ancestor of Israel; he is said to have come from Aram-naharaim, a region of Haran (see Gen. 11:31; 24:4, 10), and upon arriving in Canaan, he goes immediately down into Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20). Jacob is also a strong possibility, especially if we read "Jacob" as signifying both the patriarch and his kinship group. Conflict with his brother Esau drives Jacob away from the family to his maternal uncle Laban Paddan-aram (Gen. 28–31); see the NJPS translation, "My father was a fugitive Aramean," and Hosea 12:12, "Jacob fled to the land of Aram; there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep." Many years later, Jacob's son Joseph is betrayed by his brothers, taken by force to Egypt, and imprisoned, later growing politically powerful. The household of Jacob eventually joins Joseph in Egypt; the descriptor "few in number" (*bimte ma'at*, Deut. 26:5) is congruent with an earlier note that seventy persons from the household of Jacob went down to Egypt (Gen. 46:27).

The liturgical recital continues with the narrative thread of the Joseph story: "he became a great nation, mighty and populous," then Egyptian oppression intensified against the Israelites, and "the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut.

26:8). The description of the land of Canaan as a "land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 9) underlines the debt that Israel owes to their redeeming God, not only for their rescue from slavery, but for blessing them with agricultural bounty. Four occurrences of the phrase "land flowing with milk and honey" in Exodus are explicitly connected to the list of Canaanite indigenes whom Israel has been commanded to displace (see Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:2–3). Thus even the trope of abundant land cannot be separated from slaughter. Again, the contemporary preacher must consider this liturgical recital with attentiveness to the dark undertones of that larger narrative.

Our passage offers a notable turn to direct address of God in verse 10: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." In continuity with ancestral tradition, the prayerful worshiper makes an offering to God from the abundance that God has graciously bestowed. Rejoicing is the appropriate response of the whole community to God's goodness (v. 11). The landless Levite and stranger (*ger*) are to be included in the jubilant celebration, something that demonstrates care for those who remain vulnerable in this community. Israel thus claims its identity ritually as a people sustained by God's goodness long ago, aware of God's continuing blessings, and mandated by covenant obligation to continue to care for those in need.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

First, for a reality check about the distance between us and Deuteronomy, see Deuteronomy 25:5–12. The insistence about "firstfruits" in today's lectionary reading may feel more familiar than repulsive verses that dictate merciless cutting off of women's hands, and in sharp contrast to those verses, it is a teaching to be affirmed. But the "firstfruits" call is also profoundly distant from predominant modern Western understanding. For today it is natural to think it reasonable and responsible to

give not the firstfruits of our labor—which we think of without qualification as *ours*—but to give from the excess of our wealth (see in this regard Jesus' evaluation of giving from excess in the story of the widow's mite: Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). For predominant understanding, giving is admirable because we are going above and beyond any reasonable norm insofar as we are willing to give to others what is, after all, rightly *ours*, from *our* land, *our* labor, *our* talents. To give not from abundance but from

3. See Louis Stulman, "My Father Was a Syrian Refugee," *Journal for Preachers* 40 (2016): 9–14.

firstfruits, by contrast, marks a radically contrary orientation, for it concretely acknowledges all we possess belongs first of all to God. Nothing is first of all *ours*. We give or possess only what we have already been given (Deut. 26:10).

We can think that what is ours is ours, privately, exclusively, firstly ours, because modern Western thought understands the relationship between self and world very differently from Deuteronomy. The modern Western self is conceived as existing first as the discrete, atomistic “I,” whose natural, foremost concerns are for personal survival, security, power, and flourishing in a war of all against all. The modern Western ethical and political emphasis upon “rights” is anchored in this picture of self and world, and modern ethics and politics are wholly anchored in the natural rights of individual I’s. Smart individuals will pursue their *enlightened* self-interest, but modern thought never escapes the horizon of self-interest. Enlightened self-interest leads people to organize themselves into civil orders (e.g., families, tribes, city-states, nation-states, transnational legal structures) in order to secure degrees of power that far outstrip the potential of any individual. Of course, the selfish motivational structure remains intact, so there is ceaseless struggle both among individuals within each collective and also among collectives in the war of all against all.

Times of greed, when one individual or collective concludes they possess or can successfully seize disproportionate power over others, are ripe for tyrants, tyranny, and oppression. Times of scarcity, when fearful, desperate individuals or collectives conclude there is, for instance, not enough food, water, or treasure to allow for the flourishing or survival of all, are ripe for sectarian intolerance and ethnic cleansing. Dynamics of greed and of scarcity can be mutually reinforcing—most obviously when tyrants leverage others’ fear about survival in order to motivate sectarian intolerance and violence (all to the advantage of the tyranny).

Modern ethical and political understanding is extraordinarily vulnerable to these dynamics, for tyrants or sectarians have typically concluded their actions are indeed wholly consistent with their own enlightened self-interest; so for modern rationality the only counter to

greed and tyranny is martial resistance by the oppressed. Notably, in a modern understanding, the oppressed never resist out of commitment to what is loving, just, or good, but out of commitment to their own self-interest (in stark contrast to Amos or Isaiah, or modern prophets like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Gustavo Gutiérrez). The modern picture is abetted by unqualified Darwinian accounts of motivational dynamics, where the self-interest/enlightened self-interest either/or is described in terms of selfish and cooperative genes (more accurately, parasitic and symbiotic interactions), with all dynamics ultimately subservient to the rule of survival of the fittest (I wholly affirm evolutionary theory delimited within the sphere of science, but not, as in this case, when asserted as an unqualified metaphysic/religion).

What drops out entirely in modern Western understanding is conceptual space for any affirmation of the loving, good, or just. This trivializes the protest of the oppressed by stripping it of any moral dimension (for they too are understood to be wholly motivated by self-interest). It also serves as a salve to the dominant who are acting to preserve their privilege, for on this account they are, after all, only doing what is natural, what anyone in their position would do. Of course, insofar as this understanding of reality holds sway, the oppressed themselves are terribly well prepared to replicate the oppression they have experienced insofar as they gain power; so the vicious wheel of history rolls on in an unending war of all against all (this is precisely the dynamic described and repeatedly decried in the Deuteronomistic History).

The reality of the power of self-centered human motivation has been recognized for millennia. New in modernity is the contention that this story is not only true, but that it is exhaustively true, that all appeals to the call of God, to the call of love and justice, are confused. This passage, by contrast, is not only exquisitely sensitive to all the self-interested dynamics that modernity baptizes as “natural.” It proclaims that we are not first of all isolated selves with individual rights; we are first of all children of God, brothers and sisters who have only what we have first received, and who in turn should desire to give as we have been given (in accord

with standard triage protocols, with paramount concern/effort for those in the greatest need).

Today's text is exquisitely sensitive to the power of the natural in the modern, selfish sense. Ideas of possessing the "promised land" and of being God's "chosen people," combined with memories of having been oppressed in Egypt and also "natural" tendencies to self-aggrandizement and self-centeredness, threatened to lead (and, as the prophets lamented, did lead) the Israelites to see themselves as specially favored, to forget other peoples who already lived on the "promised land," to nativist intolerance of ethnic diversity, to sectarian ritual purity, and to forget the poor and vulnerable (it may be worth adding Deuteronomy 26:12 to the reading with regard to this last concern).

The text struggles against these diverse threats by anchoring Israelite identity in an immigrant, a "wandering Aramean"; by reminding the Israelites that they were themselves poor, marginalized, oppressed strangers in a strange land; and by urging them to share their bounty "together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you" (so, no ritual or ethnic sectarianism; all

attend to the basic needs of and break bread with all). This vision is not unrealistically utopian. This is not a classless society. It is built upon and so inescapably embodies the scars of strife (e.g., it includes "aliens"). However, it is a society whose people remember their own forced migration and slavery, a society where diverse peoples are affirmed in their diversity but where all are called to recognize a shared indebtedness to God; and so it is a society in which both diverse identities and common responsibilities to one another are affirmed. In accord with this recognition that firstfruits belong to God, Deuteronomy is saying that Israelite society (and any society) is good and faithful insofar as it is dedicated first and foremost to ensuring a basic standard of living for all, regardless of religious, racial, or ethnic identity. It means that good people and good societies will struggle to ensure *first and foremost, before any toleration of personal excess*, that national and international laws will be structured so that the basic needs of all—education, health care, food, clothing, and personal/familial security—will be met.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

²will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”

.....

⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,

¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

The Revised Common Lectionary is designed in such a way that the lesson from the Psalter is normally to be understood as a response to the Old Testament lesson; however, this principle of construction is not immediately obvious in the case of Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and its relationship with Deuteronomy 26:1–11. Rather, the more obvious connection is between Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and the Gospel lesson, Luke 4:1–13, in which verses 10–11 contains a quotation of Psalm 91:11–12. His quotation is puzzling, because it is the devil who is quoting Psalm 91! On the one hand, as a career-long Psalms scholar, I am pleased to see that the Psalms have such wide currency that even the devil can quote them. On the other hand, when the devil quotes the Psalms, it should alert us to the fact

that Scripture in general can be misinterpreted; more particularly, the assurance that the Psalms offer their readers can be misconstrued.

From a form-critical perspective, Psalm 91 is universally categorized as a psalm of confidence/trust/assurance; and it contains a threefold occurrence of one of the Psalter’s key words in the vocabulary of the faithful: “refuge” (vv. 2, 4, 9; see Pss. 2:12; 5:11; 7:1; 11:1; and often). Furthermore, the assurance that the psalmist articulates and claims in the midst of overwhelming danger and opposition (see vv. 3–7, 13) is given unique emphasis by the fact that Psalm 91 concludes with a divine speech in verses 14–16. The speech contains seven first-person verbs; and because seven is the biblical number of wholeness or completeness, this syntactical construction

reinforces the comprehensiveness of the promise of divine help and protection. Plus, in the midst of the seven verbs there is a verbless clause that stands out by way of its position and differing syntax: “I will be with them in trouble” (v. 15).

Why does Jesus reject the promise of divine protection and deliverance, interpreting the quotation of Psalm 91:11–12 by the devil as a test (Luke 4:12)? As always, context is crucial. For Jesus to claim the assurance of Psalm 91:11–12 in this context would have been self-serving. In another context, later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will claim and embrace the assurance that the Psalms offer. This latter context is a cross, from which Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46; see Ps. 31:5).

This complex of connections provides timely and important instruction for the First Sunday in Lent. In particular, Jesus’ rejection of the assurance of Psalm 91:11–12 at the beginning of Luke is a reminder that the cross is the destination of Jesus’ journey throughout the Gospel. Jesus’ journey will not be devoid of opposition and suffering, as the devil suggests might be possible. Rather, Jesus will claim divine deliverance and protection “in trouble” (Ps. 91:15). Herein may lie instruction for our own Lenten journeys. It is entirely possible for our Lenten disciplines, for instance, to become self-serving rather than cross-bearing (see Isa. 58:1–12, the Old Testament lesson for Ash Wednesday).

As Albert Camus once suggested, it seems that some Christians are willing to ascend a cross, only to be seen from a greater distance! The things we give up for Lent can become sources of pride that call attention to ourselves, rather than practices of penitence and humility. As demonstrated in Luke 4, it might even be possible to claim the assurance of Psalm 91

in an attempt to avoid suffering, rather than embracing the suffering that derives from serving God faithfully and enacting God’s love in the world, as Jesus did. This is a temptation to be avoided, as Jesus avoided it.

If there is a connection between Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and Deuteronomy 26:1–11, the clue may be the Hebrew word translated “dwelling place” (Ps. 91:9). It also occurs in the first verse of Psalm 90, which opens Book IV of the Psalter; this verse seems to offer a response to the crisis of exile that is articulated in the conclusion of Psalm 89. The exile represented a sort of renewed landlessness, and Psalms 90–91 respond by suggesting that the true home of the people of God is not the land; rather, it is God’s own self. The true assurance is to make “the Most High your dwelling place” (Ps. 91:9).

While Deuteronomy 26 anticipates entry into the land, the final chapter of the Pentateuch severs this anticipation from the narrative account of entry into the land in the book of Joshua. The canonical effect is to conclude the Pentateuch—the Torah, the first and most authoritative division of the Jewish canon—with the people of God still outside the land. This seems odd, but it almost certainly reflects the crisis of exile and the enduring situation of the people of God in the postexilic era; that is, they would never fully possess and control their land again. That was the bad news, but the good news was that God would be their “dwelling place in all generations” (Ps. 90:1; see 91:9).

That assurance is still good news. It does not promise an easy or carefree existence, but it offers the assurance that empowered Jesus, and empowers us, to bear the cross as we follow Jesus (see Luke 9:23).

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

First Sunday in Lent

Romans 10:8b–13

^{8b}“The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Paul is writing to people he has never met. When he wrote to the Thessalonians, Philipians, Corinthians, and Galatians, he knew people in those communities and called some of them by name. He had been to those cities and regions, but he has never been to Rome. In the first chapter he voiced his fervent hope to “at last succeed in coming to you” (Rom. 1:10). He repeats that hope near the end of his letter, planning to stop in Rome on his way to Spain (15:23–24). In this letter Paul does not address the kinds of divisions that plagued the community in Corinth, but he is concerned about relationships between Gentiles and Jews. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek,” he proclaims, “the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (10:12). Paul had written similar words in his Letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:28). In Romans, Paul is working out what that bold proclamation means—not only for the Romans, but also for him. While affirming that Gentiles have a place within the “body of Christ,” he is equally passionate to show that God’s promise to Israel has not been revoked.

The reading for this First Sunday in Lent is part of Paul’s program to affirm God’s promise and generosity to *both* Gentiles and Jews. In verse 8b, Paul is quoting the conclusion of a

text from Deuteronomy 30: “‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).” He wants his readers to trust God’s closeness, but we do not get the full impact of this conclusion unless we know what it is concluding! Beginning in 10:6 Paul quotes the questions that the conclusion answers. He paraphrases Deuteronomy 30:12–13, bringing Christ into the text: “‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” Paul makes a common Jewish exegetical move, using “that is” to bring Christ into the text. He also makes an interpretive turn when he writes, “Who will descend *into the abyss*?” (italics added). The Deuteronomy text asks, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us?” (Deut. 30:13). Paul changes the geographical image of crossing the sea to give a picture of Christ rising from the abyss of death.

Is Paul writing primarily to Jews? We might assume so because half of the verses in today’s passage are from Hebrew Scriptures (Deut. 30:14 in 10:8b; Isa. 28:16 in 10:11; and Joel 2:32 in 10:13). If he is not writing to Jews, why quote Hebrew Scripture? In the salutation to his letter Paul seems to be writing primarily to Gentiles (Rom. 1:5–6, 13). Paul is a devoted follower

of Christ, a believer in the crucified and risen Son of God. Yet Paul remains a Jew:

Paul saw himself wholly within Judaism, as one who was assigned a special role in the restoration of Israel and the nations (Rom 11.1–15; Gal 1.13–16). He was a reformer, one who sought to redress what he believed to be an oversight (his own, formerly, and that of his fellow Jews, still); he was not the founder of a new religion, even if things later turned out otherwise.¹

When Paul quotes verses from Hebrew Scripture in today's reading, he is writing as someone shaped by those texts. These words are in his body and in his bones. For Paul, this Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The text appointed for this Sunday comes right in the middle of chapters 9 to 11. These three chapters form a little book within the larger book of Romans. Paul begins this book-within-a-book declaring, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying . . ." (9:1a), and ends this section with what sounds like a conclusion: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (11:36). In the verses between 9:1 and 11:36, Paul struggles with the reality that some Israelites (his usual word for the Jews) have not come to believe in Christ. This is painful for Paul, for as he says, they are "my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (9:3b). Paul is a Jew who has come to believe that Jesus Christ is the closeness of God.

Deuteronomy 30 provides the foundation for what he says next. Paul picks up two key phrases in the Deuteronomy text: "on your lips" and "in your heart." The next two verses emphasize these two words: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). This is a powerful—and dangerous—proclamation to the believers in Rome. To say Jesus is Lord was treason, for the emperor

of Rome was lord. It would be one thing to speak that confession in a far-flung corner of the empire, but to make that confession in the city of Rome was a different matter. (Hopefully, Paul's letter would not fall into the wrong hands.) In the following verse Paul continues to play on the Deuteronomy text in a slightly different way: "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (10:10). Heart (*kardia*) and lips/mouth (*stoma*) are connected. Heart is internal; lips and mouth are external.² There must be congruence between the two. What we say with our lips should come from what we believe in our hearts.

There is a connection here with the Gospel reading for this Sunday. In Luke's temptation story Jesus does what Paul does in Romans; he quotes Deuteronomy. In Jesus' case the words of Deuteronomy provide his defense against every temptation of the devil (Luke 4:1–12). Jesus says nothing on his own, but trusts that God's word is near him, in his heart and on his lips. It is as though Jesus reaches up and touches an invisible *mezuzah* with the text of Deuteronomy inside. The devil also quotes Scripture. He quotes verses from Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus to jump from the temple spire (Luke 4:10–11), but the devil's lips do not match what is in his heart. Jesus and Paul, both Jews, trust that God's word is near, in their hearts and on their lips.

In Romans, the lectionary reading closes with a quote from Joel: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13). For Joel, "the Lord" in that sentence was not Jesus, but Paul sees Jesus there. He longs for all his Jewish kin to see Jesus there too, and to confess Jesus as Lord. However, if that does not happen, Paul wants believers in Rome to know that God's promise to Israel remains: "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (11:2). Paul wants those of us who read his letter now to know that too.

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

1. Mark D. Nanos, "Paul and Judaism," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 552.

2. Audrey West, "Commentary on Romans 10:8b–3," in Working Preacher—Preaching This Week. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preachings.aspx?commentary_id=2774.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This passage from Romans comes to us on the First Sunday in Lent. For those who did not attend Ash Wednesday services, today's lessons serve as the invitation to the observance of Lent, when repentance and reconciliation, approached through spiritual discipline and austerity, take center stage in Christian life.

We enter the middle of a conversation in Romans, or at least, a discourse by Paul that presumes knowledge of some of the fledgling church's challenges in Rome. Rome is a multi-ethnic, religiously diverse population center. Followers of Christ in Rome include those born into both Jewish and Greco-Roman religious traditions. Having grappled with the question of how Greek and Jewish believers can share in Christian community in previous letters, Paul jumps in with both feet, offering a full-fledged defense of the possibility of an ethnically diverse church and approaches to following Christ that draw on the strengths of multiple religious traditions. Jews and Greeks are religiously distinctive, but also are ethnic, cultural peoples with different histories, social locations, and relationships to empire. Paul affirms that God's generosity is not limited by a particular way of expressing faith. God is large enough to span our ways of expressing our allegiance and the varying shapes of our hearts.

The resonances will be many for US churches that find themselves in diverse or changing communities. As fewer churches find themselves easily recruiting new members of the same ethnic, denominational, and linguistic background as longtime members, increasing numbers of congregations must ask the question of how diverse practices and customs can come together in one church. Especially in the historic denominations, many congregations struggle to see beyond the way things have always been done. This reading invites longtime members to imagine that new people from outside their cultural and religious worlds might bring new gifts, express faith in new ways. Paul points to the unity of Christ and the generosity of God as starting points for this project. This lesson suggests that the tests of what unite us

will be simple ones, ones that will have little to do with liturgical colors, or the ordering of prayers, or the placement of candles. We may sing in different languages, to different familiar melodies, but we will offer what is on our lips and on our hearts.

The reading begins with the word: "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Rom. 10:8b). The word of faith, in Paul's view, has power to unite a diversity of practice and background. It is not complicated or far off (the rather complex theological argument Paul has undertaken in the Letter to the Romans thus far notwithstanding). The reference to the nearness of the word suggests both a connection to Jewish tradition and accessibility to those with no prior experience of the God of Israel. For those versed in Hebrew Scripture, a word that is near, written on the lips and the heart, calls to mind Deuteronomy 11:18 and Jeremiah 31:33. For those unfamiliar with God's promises through the covenant with Israel, a word that is near and accessible invites fullness of participation. Depth of knowledge and tradition enriches faith, but is not a prerequisite.

The preacher calling her or his congregation to the observance of a holy Lent might well make good use of both "insider" and "outsider" aspects of this claim about the word of faith. It is a chance to root Christian belief in the covenant at Sinai, while at the same time inviting those who are new to the faith into a life of practice and proclamation, equally solid on the ground of their own relationship with the Holy One as those who have more years of faith to their credit.

Paul calls upon the church in Rome to "confess with your lips and believe in your heart." Just as there are insiders and outsiders to the history of God's relationship with Israel, there are internal and external aspects to the faith. In Paul's view, both are required. It is not enough to pay lip service, but neither is the sort of private and personal faith that never reaches the point of public confession adequate to the challenge of following Christ.

So what must we confess and believe? Paul here identifies Jesus' lordship and resurrection

as the centers of the gospel narrative. In keeping with Paul's consistent emphasis on the centrality of the cross, this suggests that the hearer must both believe and show forth a willingness to sacrifice everything. Paul emphasizes humility, even humiliation. We must be willing to give up our pride and our good standing in the eyes of others when we are called into the service of Christ. The power to risk humiliation comes in the news of the resurrection. To confess resurrection is to see beyond the visible end of the story, to believe in the triumph of love, and to embrace a life beyond fear (even when we are terrified). Naming collective and personal fears—such as loss of power, status, safety, or identity—that might hold back the confessions of Christians in your particular context may help to make this connection for the listener.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to give up dreams of a worldly and powerful king as our Messiah. Paul uses language that sets Christ in parallel with Caesar and then firmly establishes Christ's precedence. To confess Jesus as Lord is to accept that God has chosen an impoverished Southwest Asian man from a backwater of the Roman Empire to be our savior. This passage begs us to imagine that God might be doing something equally unexpected, even deeply countercultural, in our own day. When we claim a Lord who is not Caesar, what do we risk? What do we give up? Which principalities and powers have a claim on our allegiance? What will happen to that allegiance if we have only one Lord, one leader who is worthy of following? If we are called to public expression of the humiliation of the cross, with whom must

we stand? How will our respectability—often so dear to faithful church folk—be challenged? What might we lose?

In a time of political polarization, this reading from Romans offers a way beyond partisan politics. Whatever our ideal political leader may look like, the call to confess one Lord takes Christians beyond the political divides of the moment, serving as a powerful reminder that no political leader can be our Messiah. This frees the church to speak directly to love for God and neighbor, to forgiveness and to the belovedness of all God's people, values with the potential to unite us when politics divides us.

The reading ends with the affirmation of God's generosity and the universality of the gospel promise. There is hope for all of our hearts of stone. Our willingness to risk all, to take up the cross for love, to publicly offer our lives as an offering and sacrifice to God will make us one church, one community of believers. The creative preacher may start with the gathered community as a safe setting in which to hone the practice of love and forgiveness, then point the faithful out the doors and into their families, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities to put those basic Christian gifts to work. Paul's extravagant claim on universality is large enough to push Christ's followers into relationships beyond the walls of the church and beyond the bounds of denomination. This reading frames the Lenten invitation to turn toward the cross as one of freedom—freedom to love fearlessly and to live beyond the boundaries we and the world around us so often impose.

ANNA B. OLSON

First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1–13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The temptation story of Jesus appears only in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:12–13; Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), not in the Gospel of John. Yet each Synoptic version is unique in its own way. Mark’s account is the shortest, providing only a two-verse summary of the story. Although many Christians associate the dialogue between Jesus and the devil with the temptation account, it is present only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, while the devil’s three challenges to Jesus are essentially the same in Matthew and Luke, their order and the language used are different.

In terms of Lent, Jesus’ temptation functions as the basic biblical story and rationale for the forty days leading up to Easter (six and a

half weeks, not counting Sundays). This First Sunday in Lent is an invitation for Christians willingly to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Followers subject themselves to the kind of self-scrutiny and testing that unveils each person’s deepest hopes as well as the darkest and most self-serving outcomes of their greatest capacities, gifts, and callings. Consequently, Luke’s opening scene is particularly striking, since Luke is the only Gospel to portray Jesus in the wilderness being “led by the Spirit.” Mark and Matthew’s accounts depict the Spirit driving or leading Jesus into wilderness, but not accompanying him during his adventures there (Luke 4:1; Mark 1:12; Matt. 4:1). From Luke’s perspective, Jesus is escorted through the wilderness

and is not alone during his period of encounter, testing, and moderation.

The description of being led by God's spirit "in the wilderness" echoes the story of Israel's divinely orchestrated wilderness venture after their liberation from Egypt: "So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 13:18). God chooses the wilderness setting in which to reconstitute Israel as the people of God. It is the place of God's assured and responsive presence (Exod. 16:9–10) as well as undeserved provision (Exod. 16:11–17). Moreover, the wilderness is the space in which God establishes new ordinances, like Sabbath, that summon Israel to reflect on who God is for the community and who the community is to God (Exod. 16:23, 25–26, 29–30; 20:8–11; 31:13–17).

In the book of Exodus, the wilderness is not just the place of salvation and confirmation of Israel's status as God's people; it is also a venue that generates worry and doubt. Here the community faces its mortality and finitude. Israel experiences collective misgivings about its fate and confronts the uncertainty that often accompanies a new and untold future (Exod. 14:11–12; 16:1–3). Moreover, the wilderness is the place where Israel waits for the manifestation of Moses' prophetic and law-giving work. Moses fasted for forty days while in the presence of God, awaiting God's commandments (Exod. 24:18–25:1; cf. 34:28). In similar fashion, the Gospel of Luke describes Jesus' stint in the wilderness as forty days without food, in which he rehearses the commandments of God as a counter to the devil's enticements. Jesus replies to the devil's lures by restating three Torah pronouncements: (1) "One does not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4; Deut. 8:3b); (2) "worship the Lord your God and serve God only" (Luke 4:8; Deut. 6:13); (3) and "do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4:12; Deut. 6:16; Isa. 7:12). In so doing, Luke depicts Jesus as both a teacher of the Law and observant practitioner who can reinterpret it in light of the current challenge confronting him. As such, the wilderness in Luke becomes a place of responsive and contextual theological discourse.

Up until Luke 4:1, the wilderness location in the Gospel of Luke represented the work of John the Baptist. The wilderness is named as the site of John's prophetic preparation and witness (Luke 1:80; 3:2, 4; cf. 7:24). After the temptation, however, the wilderness becomes a space that Jesus traverses; and it is not the site of witness and prophecy. Rather, the wilderness becomes the site of Jesus' prayerful reprieves: "But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:16; cf. 4:42). The wilderness becomes a sanctuary for God's agent, providing an escape for rejuvenation and assurance. In Psalm 91:9–11, the psalmist remarks, "Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent." Even the psalmist's confidence about the work of angels in protecting and providing for God's agent (Ps. 91:11–12) is reminiscent of Luke 4 when Jesus responds to the devil's second challenge (Luke 4:9–11).

Perhaps most striking is the difference between Luke and Matthew's versions of the dialogue between Jesus and the devil. The order of temptations in Matthew is (1) turn stones to bread, (2) throw oneself down from the pinnacle of the temple in "the holy city" (4:5), and (3) worship the devil in exchange for imperial rule. In contrast, Luke's order and language are different. The Lukan order is (1) turn this stone to a loaf of bread, (2) worship the devil in exchange for his sovereign authority, and (3) throw oneself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem.

Reading Luke's account against Matthew's alone could suggest that the explicit reference to "Jerusalem," as opposed to the alias "holy city," is an incidental variant. Within the larger storyline of the Gospel of Luke (and even the book of Acts), however, the image of Jerusalem is weighty. After all, the opening scene of the Gospel of Luke places readers in the temple with Zechariah, who receives the prophecy of John the Baptist's birth (Luke 1:8). In Luke 2, baby Jesus is presented in the temple, and the prophets Simeon and Anna proclaim his messianic work publicly (Luke 2:22–38). In fact, the Gospel of Luke is so obsessed with

Jerusalem's role in Jesus' story that it spends an entire ten chapters narrating his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:28). This travel narrative is unique to the Gospel of Luke because it expands a journey that occurs in one verse in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 10:1; cf. 9:33). Not only does Luke open with a series of prophetic moments in the Jerusalem temple and spend a large part of its story building anticipation for what will happen in Jerusalem at Jesus' death. The Gospel also closes with readers watching the disciples return to Jerusalem to celebrate Christ's resurrection and ascension (Luke 24:52–53).

Together, the images of the wilderness and Jerusalem in Luke's temptation story provide a rich backdrop for reflection during the Lenten season. Lent is the time Christians purposely give our faith permission to "work on us." We

willingly subject ourselves to the pain of fitting into a daily mold or way of being we do not routinely live out, in order to encounter ourselves in new ways and wrestle with our sense of authority and insignificance, no matter how misguided. We deny ourselves the luxuries and conveniences of our surroundings, so we can remember God's provision, protection, and sanctuary for others and ourselves. In addition, we remember that just as Jerusalem is a magnetic landmark in Luke, our confession that Jesus is the Christ who has come to bring justice and salvation is our magnetic landmark of faith. It compels us to take seriously this time of penance so that we can become more patient, equitable, and altruistic in a world obsessed with instant remedies, dominance, and self-glorification.

SHIVELY T. J. SMITH

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Lent commences with combat between Jesus and the devil. Is this devil real? Baudelaire coined the idea that "the devil's greatest wile is to convince you he does not exist." Thomas Merton, taking the opposite approach, noticed Christians who attribute all manner of things to Satan and concluded that what Satan wants mostly is attention. We should not imagine a red guy with horns and a pitchfork. Painters like Titian and Tintoretto captured the sense of it when they portrayed the devil as a strikingly handsome, innocent-looking young man. C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* helps us understand that what is not of God tries so very hard to undo us. There is evil, and it is intensely personal.

Consider the terrain: from Jericho, tourists lift their gaze westward and see the Mount of Temptation. An ancient monastery, to mark the memory of Jesus' forty-day trial, is carved into the cliffs. It is one thing for Christians to build a church where a healing miracle or the resurrection happened; but why venture out to the place Satan chose to assault Jesus?

This wilderness is not a vast expanse of sand with the occasional cactus or tumbleweed.

Instead, we see a rocky, daunting zone of cliffs and caves, the haunt of wild beasts. People avoided the place, believing demons and evil spirits ranged there, knowing that predators and brigands lurked there.

Jesus chose to go there—or, as Luke strangely tells us, was led there by the Spirit. How silly are we to think that if the Spirit leads, it will be to a smooth, comfortable, pleasant place. The Spirit that leads us led Jesus into peril.

In Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, every time young Jesus reached out for pleasure, "ten claws nailed themselves into his head and two frenzied wings beat above him, tightly covering his temples. He shrieked and fell down on his face." His mother pleaded with a rabbi (who knew how to drive out demons) to help. The rabbi shook his head. "Mary, your boy isn't being tormented by a devil; it's not a devil, it's God—so what can I do?" "Is there no cure?" the wretched mother asked. "It's God, I tell you. No, there is no cure." "Why does he torment him?" The old exorcist sighed but did not answer. "Why does he torment him?" the mother asked again.

“Because he loves him,” the old rabbi finally replied.¹

If this story is somehow about the love between Jesus and God, we might want to rethink the rationale for reading this passage as the kickoff to Lent. A bevy of predictable sermons will be preached with the plot of “Here is how Jesus overcame temptation; go thou and do likewise.” However, the early church’s theologians, and the other good ones through the Middle Ages and Reformation, shuddered over their inability to elude the claws of the devil. It is not that we can resist just as Jesus did. No; he is our Savior precisely because he accomplished what we could never do on even our best, holiest days. Martin Luther, whose hymns frequently deal with “the prince of darkness grim,” suggested that when we are tempted by the devil, we can be encouraged by the fact that we know and are loved by the One who conquered the devil. It is not about technique, but a relationship.

Relationships are important. John Chrysostom, Luther, and many others pointed out that the devil attacks those who are lonely. So we need to surround ourselves with other Christians. Actually, if this text is not so much about us resisting temptation, but Jesus doing so in our stead, then we have to ask, how then do we, as the body of Christ, find ourselves in this story? Does the church, postmodern and increasingly isolated, find itself in a strange wilderness? What are the temptations, the tests we must undergo? Unlike Christ, we the body of Christ fail so often. In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Son of God who rejected Satan’s offer of power is then judged by his own church, which thinks his demands are too high.

How does the church in the world cope with the tests that are about our love for God and God’s for us? We do not know how to pull off the stones-into-bread trick. We actually give a lot of bread, through food collections and soup kitchens. Jesus refused bread, preferring that metaphorical bread, God’s Word. Do we give bread without attaching the Word—God’s Word, or the words of established friendship?

Do we assuage our guilt or pad our spiritual resume by dropping off food, while never building a relationship with the hungry, who are just as lonely as we, who have plenty of food, are?

Jesus’ refusal of power might give the church pause when we think about politics in America. Do we try the Moral Majority approach and seize whatever power we can to pursue holy ends? Is there something intrinsically perverse in the very grasping for power? J. R. R. Tolkien must have had this story in the back of his mind when he conceived of that ring of power in *The Lord of the Rings*. How desperately everyone wanted the ring, including those with noble intentions—but the ring would destroy anyone who kept it, even Gandalf the wise wizard, even Frodo the humblest of the hobbits. Power is not to be pursued, but shunned and destroyed. So the church’s calling is to be as kenotic as Jesus, emptying ourselves of power, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2).

Richard Rohr found something profound here: “This second temptation is to doubt that the kingdom of God is here, because we are overwhelmed by the apparent kingdoms of business, money, the media, etc. We ‘worship’ their influence and thus give them even more. We’re so overwhelmed by the sense of evil, so overwhelmed by the kingdom of this world, it is difficult to look beyond it and see the presence of God and the power of the Spirit.”²

Luke, we may recall, switches the order of the three tests, and his order makes the most theological sense. For him, the final test, the most daunting one, is the thing we have been trying all our faith-lives to do: to trust God. The devil even cites Scripture to buttress his point, reminding us of Shakespeare’s wry comment: “What damned error, but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament?” (*Merchant of Venice*, act 3, scene 2). Just because the church reads and quotes Scripture, and just because the church jabbars away about trusting God, does not mean we are in sync with what God is asking us to do in the world.

1. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 30.

2. Richard Rohr, *The Good News according to Luke* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 100.

Luke adds his footnote: that the devil slinked away, but began right away to look for a more opportune time to pounce again. Medieval cathedrals featured gargoyles, those comical yet scary monsters, grotesque apes and pigs. Why? Were they a bit of comic relief in such serious architecture? Were they foils to highlight by contrast the beauty of God? Did they in some

way represent that persistent truth that once you have survived the harrowing cleansing of worship, your troubles are only beginning as you cross the threshold back into the world?

So Lent is no time for heroic resilience. We tremble and trust that “one little word shall fell him.”

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