

“Give Thanks”  
St. Paul’s UCC Church  
March 6, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is described as a solemn religious observance in Christianity commemorating the time leading up to Easter. It is for 40 days not counting Sundays beginning with Ash Wednesday, and a time to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God.

Our two texts for today are interesting contrasts. From Luke we hear of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. From Deuteronomy we hear Moses telling the people to give thanks for their bounty as they transfer from the wilderness to the land flowing with milk and honey. The heading for Chapter 26 is “The Ceremony Upon Entering the Land:

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (CEB)**

**26** Once you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, <sup>2</sup>take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the LORD your God is giving you and put it in a basket. Then go to the location the LORD your God selects for his name to reside. <sup>3</sup>Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: “I am declaring right now before the LORD my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.”

<sup>4</sup>The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the LORD your God’s altar. <sup>5</sup>Then you should solemnly state before the LORD your God:

“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. <sup>6</sup>The

Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. <sup>7</sup> So we cried out for help to the LORD, our ancestors' God. The LORD heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup> He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, LORD, have given me.” Set the produce before the LORD your God, bowing down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup> Then celebrate all the good things the LORD your God has done for you and your family—each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.

Moses had a long talk (Chapters 6 – 26) to the Hebrews giving the God's laws to live by with chapter 26 being the final chapter of instructions. He reminded the people that it was God that led them out of bondage and that they should give thanks. He reminded the people that God had led them through the wilderness. Then they are about to cross the Jordan River. There was still a lot of work to do to claim the land. Moses implores the people that it was God who is leading them to their new homeland and giving thanks should be a no brainer. After all, they are a people of the covenant. Moses is emphatic about the necessity of obedience to those laws as the condition for enjoying the covenant.

According to Jewish tradition, first fruit offerings were made of seven species native to the land: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (*Mishna Bikkurim* 1.3).

Justin Michael Reed writes: This lectionary reading shows how the people of God understand their identity as a perpetual journey.

The people's journey has roots in God saving them from slavery in Egypt. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, they journeyed

through the wilderness and faced such great hardships that, at times, they imagined life was better when they were still enslaved (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:4–5). The book of Deuteronomy provides what appears to be a final stage in their journey; Moses gives a (very long) final speech while they stand on the cusp of arriving in the promised land.

But the journeying will not end there. We know that the people will continue to face a difficult journey in the books of Joshua and Judges where they fight to conquer the native people who are protecting their homeland from these Israelite invaders. We know that the journey continues in personal sagas with migrants like Ruth and Naomi who depend on one another as they seek companionship, food, and security amidst the harsh vicissitudes of life. We also know that the journey will continue on a much larger scale with examples like the traumatic exile of the northern tribes kicked out by the Assyrians and the southern tribe expelled by the Babylonians.

These difficult journeys started before Deuteronomy 26, and they will continue after it. It seems that migration—arduous sojourning—has always been, and will always be, a part of the people’s identity. Therefore, this lectionary reading invites the audience to partake in a journey that is both a ritual and a remembrance of the significance of migration to who they are as a people.

Speaking of journeys, we are on a journey in Lent. On our journey, we will follow Jesus’ journey to the Cross. Jesus began his journey by being baptized by John the Baptist. Then the following takes place, He is tempted:

**Gospel: Luke 4:1-13 (CEB) Jesus’ Temptation**

**4** Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. <sup>2</sup>There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and

afterward Jesus was starving. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus replied, “It is written, *People will not live only by bread.*”

<sup>5</sup> Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> The devil said, “I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It has been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours.”

<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*”

<sup>9</sup> The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here; <sup>10</sup> for it is written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you* <sup>11</sup> and *they will take you up in their hands so that you will not hit your foot on a stone.*”

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered, “It has been said, *Do not test the Lord your God.*” <sup>13</sup> After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

May God bless our hearing of His holy word. Amen.

Forty is an important number in the bible. However, it is not a specific length of time, but it basically means enough time for the event to take place. Some examples: It rained for 40 days and 40 nights; Moses was atop of Mount Sinai for 40 days; the children of Israel lived in the wilderness for 40 years; Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days; and Lent is 40 days not counting Sundays beginning with Ash Wednesday

The Greek word for “the devil” is *diabolos* which literally means “the slanderer.” So, when we hear what the devil says to Jesus in trying to get him to abuse his power, we can keep that definition in mind.

First, the devil tempted Jesus to exploit his identity as the Son of God to exert his power over the things of the world and miraculously turn stones into bread. Jesus later did see that the hungry crowd of 5,000 were all filled. He was not going to abuse his power for the slanderer.

Then, the devil tempted Jesus to take hold of his power and destiny now by using the devil's means for ruling on earth (getting people to give up on what is good and to join his "team"). It is a direct appeal to the human desire for power. Jesus was fully human, AND fully divine, and the devil was appealing to Jesus' humanness.

Finally, the devil tempted Jesus to test God's promise of protection, jumping of the highest place at the Jerusalem temple. Could it have been that he is trying to keep Jesus from the cross?

The devil's choices of content are not out of thin air. They are all things that truly and rightly belong to the Christ, the Son of God. And they are things that are guaranteed to be part of Christ's glory.

Jesus *already* has ultimate authority and power; it *has been* given to him by the Father; he *can* work miracles... the devil wants him to exploit that power.

Jesus is *already* the Prince of Peace and the rulers of the Kingdom of this world... the devil wants him to abuse that power for his own pleasure.

Jesus *is* the beloved Son of God, in whom the Father is well pleased; he *has* the Father's heart... the devil wants him to distrust that love and make the Father prove it.

Those were temptations for Jesus, but probably not for any of us. But we have a multitude of other temptations. We probably are not tempted to rob a bank, for example. Instead, most of our temptations are nice things, just bad choices at the time.

A reminder is that temptation (or testing) is not coercion. Accepting a temptation is a matter of personal choice. Jesus rejected the temptations and lived a sinless life. We will not avoid all temptations.

The connection between Jesus' testing and our own was recognized by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15)

The good news is that we can give thanks that Jesus went to the cross for each one of us. We live in Christ's glory. Our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.