

Sermon March 6 2022 First Sunday of Lent
Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 4:1-13:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then 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, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11:

When 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, you 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. You 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.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you 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. 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. So 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. Then 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.

SERMON: "Hope & Confidence, Deliverance & Gratitude" Rev. Brent Damrow

Nick Carter, who is the former president of Andover Newton Theological Seminary – remember that place that sent us all those wonderful guest leaders while I was on my sabbatical? Nick Carter loves this passage. And his attention is directed straight towards the people. The people

there gathered on the banks of the Jordan River just across from the Promised Land, and they are almost at the end of their journey, even if not quite yet. He sees them out on the plains, poised to enter the Promised Land, to receive that gift that God promised so long ago. In fact it's been 39 years, 11 months, and 1 week that the people on the plains have been on the move. 39 years, 11 months, and 1 week that they had been in the wilderness, lost and unsure. There in that place, learning a whole new way of being, a whole new way of living, a whole new way of relating to one another, a whole new set of rules – holy and common ones.

For 39 years, 11 months and 1 week, he remembers how those people were so often hungry, so often confused. He knew that they grumbled and they mumbled. He remembers how they were chastised for wrong behavior, and admits that that was often deserved. Nick Carter remembers how often the people wished they could just go back, as if that's ever possible. Go back to the way things were. And the people there, they were tired. They were worn down and they were worn out. But they were not stuck.

No! Nick's attention is drawn to the fact that on the plains on this day, the people would have been filled with great anticipation, that there would have been a prevailing sense of God's grace, just how far God had brought them, and what God was about to do for them. There was the impossible possibility, and it was so close.

This passage has an incredibly rich heritage within the Jewish tradition, and I hope and pray within the Christian one, too. In this passage there is a defining role in how we understand covenant. In fact, if we had read just a few verses more, it would have made that explicit that this is all about our covenant with God and with each other. How we see God's faithful living, and equally then, how we are called to respond. And notice in this passage, before we labor ourselves down as we do in Lent with expectation upon expectation, in this passage how we are called to respond is in celebration. To recognize the richness of God's giving, to give back from that, and even as we do, tell the story of deliverance. Thanksgiving always dancing with remembrance. We remember. We remember God's deliverance. We remember our gratitude. Remembering what was given to us: hope and confidence.

Friends, we are in moments just like those on the plains, I feel, in so many ways -- as a church, as a community -- where we are so close to the imagination of resuming life in all of its fullness. And yet, not yet. We are today in moments, like this first Sunday in Lent, where we do turn to walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem and what will be on display there, what is offered and effected by human hands there in Jerusalem. And in turn, what is offered by Christ's hands, both those spread wide on the cross, and those open on our communion table.

Moments like this Sunday, when the pandemic's grip is giving way to the imagination and need of a new beginning, we are worn out and weary, and we've been at this nowhere near 39 years, 11 months, and 1 week. Do I get an Amen for that?! We have only been at this a couple years of wandering by new rules that both protect and, if we're honest, chafe. I have heard and been part of more grumbling and mumbling than I care to remember, and sometimes even succumbing to that temptation to want to go back to the way things were. But we know that isn't life. That isn't faith. That isn't Lent. All those things are moving forward. Even if and especially because we

aren't quite sure what it will look like when we get there, we are called, like this passage says, to remember.

Remember that on those plains no one among that weary band had ever seen the land of milk and honey yet either, and yet on they went. We remember the story of the Exodus, a people on the move, even if not always getting it right, following the way to the stuff of promise. Because the story of the Exodus, the story of Lent, none of it relies on a pretty human picture. It does not rely on us having courage or fortitude, or making it, or even getting it. Rather, the story, focuses on a God who delivers, and offers us the gift of new life and even salvation, if we just open our hands, like we will around this table, to receive it.

As we stand here, with the people on the plains on the banks of the Jordan River, with the Israelites awaiting their new life, we worship on the banks of the Housatonic River awaiting ours. We encounter this story. We remember that pivotal moment when the people were about to live into their dreams, God did not offer a new rule for learning, but instead the gift of the memory of deliverance. And an invitation to gather everyone together, everyone -- no matter who they were or when they joined this ragtag group of people on a journey. In this passage is an invitation to celebrate, to eat of the bounty, and then simply to delight in thanksgiving. To take the memory and make it action. To remember all that has happened, and not just learn it but to ingest it. To make it part of our future, deliverance and gratitude stoking hope and confidence. Remembering a past journey to shape ours that still goes on.

I'm so deeply grateful for a new voice. It's funny, whenever I talk about a new voice to people here, they always look at me and say, oh of course, I love that person. The new voice in my head right now is Rachel Held Evans. Her journey resonates with mine in many ways. Her story telling is exquisite. And her own journey was cut way too short. She laments, she wishes, she calls out that church could be more like this story in Deuteronomy. More like something we ingest, we embody, we live, rather than just something that we contemplate or think about, make doctrine about, or even pray about.

In her book, "Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church," she turns to voices that have inspired her, like Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who is so thankful that nearing the end of the Lenten journey in that upper room, when Jesus was remembering this story of deliverance in the Passover, she is thankful that Jesus likewise did not choose to offer one more teaching for his disciples to learn, one more doctrine for them to hold on, not one more parable or one more challenge. But instead Jesus gave his disciples this meal, something to take into our bodies, to ingest, to remember.

Rachel also turns to the voice of Shauna Niequist, a New York Times bestselling author who writes -- as Cindy so eloquently mentioned a little bit ago in her announcement about our congregation's Meal Train -- food is the language of care. It's the thing we do when traditional language fails us, when we don't know what to say, and when there are no more words to say, we gather and we eat. And it is enough. She also honors her own experience, so like those on the Exodus, of striving and struggling and not always getting it right, of sometimes wanting to quit and go back to the way things were. But Rachel will say she always found home, as she remembered, in this meal.

Jesus didn't offer a challenged bunch of disciples yet another challenge. Instead he offered them the gift of this table. He didn't offer the gift to perfect people, high and holy, whatever you think of those disciples. Instead he gave those disciples a gift to hold on to and remember, just as he does for us. He looked around that table, as he will look around this table, not to judge or even to reward, but rather I think to see how vulnerable they were, how far they had yet to go in their journey. And all Jesus said was simply: Open your hands and I will give you the bread of life. Open your hands and I will quench your thirst for goodness and wipe away any sour taste of sin. And after each time he offered them that gift, do you remember what he said? Do this, and remember. Don't forget this. Use this to put you and your lives back together. Just accept this gift, and do nothing but respond in gratitude. For this table, this life, this gift, it's grace, it's nothing earned, it cannot be taken away. Since you did nothing to deserve this meal, you can do nothing but live into it in gratitude.

For thousands of years, we have remembered what happens at this table – a way of putting us back together, a way of holding hands side by side, a way of creating brave space, a pick-me-up for all of us when we give up, and a remembrance most of all of a God who delivers. And all that we do at the end of this -- do you remember what happens after every communion meal? A prayer of thanksgiving. An active prayer of thanksgiving. A chance to go out into life in thanksgiving. And friends, for thousands of more years, the story on the plains at the Promised Land has likewise been the stuff of remembering for people of faith.

So as we enter this Lent, as we stand so near deliverance once again – yes, the deliverance of Easter, and yes, the deliverance from this pandemic, too – I want you to bring your weary, worn out selves to this table, your whole selves. The parts that are so ready for this all to be over – the pandemic, war, struggle, strife. And remembering that this is a table of deliverance. This is grace not earned. This is something to be ingested. Not another thing to be learned.

Come as you are, for you too need not be a pretty picture. Instead, you just need to be willing to let the love of Christ be painted all over you. Come in your full vulnerability. Come dancing with joy. Just come opening your hands to receive. And then we will do that natural thing that this passage calls us to do, the only thing that can be done after such a great gift. We will celebrate at this table and we will leave in thanksgiving, opened fuller yet to live into the blossoming gifts of God's bounty.

The people's story didn't end when they entered the Promised Land. No, a new chapter was just beginning. But because they infused that new chapter with memory, what they had learned on their journey, not just what they had done but even more what God had done – bread raining down, water gushing forth. They remembered that all of it was revealing new ways of being in loving connection.

And friends, the story of Christ doesn't end at the crucifixion or even the resurrection. Instead, it will offer us the chance for a new chapter to begin, too. And so we must remember what we have learned on our journey for these last two years. Yes, the beautiful things that we have learned and tried to do as church. Yes, the beautiful things we have seen breaking out in the world, but

even more what God has been doing – beauty breaking forth, hope sustaining, love kindling. So that we might too discover our new chapter, new ways of being in loving connection.

Friends, these are not going to be easy times, but they will be full ones. Let us approach them not in stress or fear, but with openness, maybe even a joyful tear. For the story of the Exodus is not the story of human triumph, rather a remembrance that in every change of our lives, individual and collective, God faithful will remain. It is a story to remember that God will undertake to guide in future days, as in the past, and bring us together safe and blessed at last.

Friends, that is the good news for today.