

1st Sunday of Lent, Year C, March 10th, 2019

St. Augustine posed the question: “Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

This Lenten season begins with the recounting of the first fruits offering that was commanded of Israel before entry into the Promised Land. We are reminded that to enter into the promises of Easter, we must offer the best of ourselves in the coming Lent.¹

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

4“**The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it in front of the altar of the Lord, your God.**

5**Then you shall declare before the Lord, your God, ‘My father** The father is Jacob who was renamed Israel. Jews understood themselves collectively and so when one recalled that Jacob had been a sojourner in Egypt, it was a profession of one’s own experience in the collective identity of Israel.¹ **was a wandering Aramean** This underlies the contrast between the miserable circumstances of Israel earlier and the relative comfort that came with their settlement in the promised land.² **who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong and numerous.** Jacob had 12 sons and the older boys, who were jealous of the second to the youngest, Joseph, sold him to some slave traders who took him to Egypt. Some years later there was a famine and Jacob and his sons and their families all moved to Egypt where Joseph had a great deal of power and where he had providentially stored huge quantities of grain. The number of those who went to Egypt from the house of Jacob was seventy. Some 400 years passed and the descendants of Jacob multiplied and fell out of power and into slavery. God finally took pity on them and sent Moses to lead them back to the land that God had given to Jacob. So Moses led about 1 million men plus their wives, children and slaves out of Egypt.

6**When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us,** This change in person represents an ancient liturgical form. For the Hebrews, it was like saying, “my father was Israel, therefore, I am Israel.”³ **imposing hard labor upon us,** Taskmasters were set over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor and they had to build two supply cities for Pharaoh. The more they were oppressed, the more the Israelites multiplied and spread and the Egyptians finally reduced them to cruel slavery, making life bitter for them with hard work in mortar and brick and all kinds of field work—the whole cruel fate of slaves. Finally the Pharaoh commanded that all the Hebrew boy babies be drowned.

7**we cried to the Lord, the God of our father, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression.**

8**He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders;** This was the greatest time for signs and wonders in the history of the Israelites. When Moses sought permission from the Pharaoh to let the people go, he first turned a staff into a snake, then he changed the waters of the Nile into blood, which was followed by the multiplication of frogs (which infested Egypt’s houses, beds, ovens and kneading troughs. Frogs were everywhere!). The plagues were sent to show the power of Yahweh over the various gods that were worshipped in Egypt. Then came gnats, biting flies, a livestock disease carried by the flies, a related human skin disease and the worst hailstorm in Egyptian history. In the eighth plague, the wheat, spelt, and fruit trees that had survived the hail were devoured by locusts. Then came a sandstorm that blew in so thick that the sun was obscured and the whole land, except Goshen where the

Israelites lived, was reduced to darkness for three days. Finally every firstborn son of man and beast died (except the Israelites who put the blood of the lamb on their doorposts).

9and bringing us into this country, This is a reference to the promised land but for us it can mean the Church for we were once wondering gentiles and we owe someone for the gift of our faith.¹ he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. Milk signified wealth, prosperity and peace, and honey, a delicacy, was a reference to abundance.⁴

10therefore, I have now brought you the firstfruits of the products of the soil which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And having set them before the Lord, your God, you shall bow down This means to worship. in his presence.” This offering was divided among the priests, the poor, and aliens. It was an act of almsgiving. The ceremonial recitation that went along with the offering was intended to remind the one who offered it that his family too, had once been poor and had been aliens in a strange land.¹

Romans 10:8-13

Brothers and sisters:

8What does Scripture say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” This is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 that is, the word of faith that we preach Moses contends that Israel could not escape responsibility for obeying the word of God, as though the Torah were somewhere beyond its reach. In the spirit of Moses, Paul insists that Israel cannot escape responsibility for obeying the word of the gospel, as though it were forced to look high and low for Christ. On the contrary, Israel cannot plead ignorance because the gospel has come to its doorstep through the Scriptures and the missionary efforts of the Church.⁵

9for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. At least from the third century B.C. we have documentary evidence that, out of respect, the Jews did not utter the name “Yahweh” but generally referred to God instead as “Lord”. The first Christians, by giving Christ the title of “Lord”, were making a profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus.⁷

10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, This is an old biblical concept: the state of being in right covenant relationship. To be righteous or “justified” meant that you were the rightful heir. This is something that you could not earn but you could squander it away.¹ It could also mean that you were “not guilty,” that you obeyed the law. The gospel, says Paul, reveals how a person can be restored to a reconciled, intimate, covenant relationship with God. It tells how one can become God’s loyal subject, adopted child, spouse, and friend.⁶ and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The public ceremony by which a person declared his allegiance to Jesus was baptism.⁶ Paul connects the inward conviction (heart) and outward confession (lips) of faith in Jesus. The images are drawn from the Deuteronomy quote in verse 8.⁵

11For the Scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ This is a reference to Deuteronomy 28:16: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. All nations are saved together in Christ just as all nations sinned together before his coming.⁵ On the one hand, by choosing the delusion of idolatry over gratitude to their Creator, the pagans had mired themselves in sexual perversion, greed, murder, and every other vice. It was a fair portrait of life on any street of Corinth or Rome. On the other hand, by trusting in their performance of religious duties, the Jews had entangled themselves in a subtler trap: pride. They

thought themselves better than the pagans because they not only abstained from debauchery but also lived the lifestyle prescribed by Moses. However, when they kept the outward customs without letting the Holy Spirit produce the inner transformation that the Law really required, what Moses called a “circumcised heart,” then the Jewish lifestyle was pointless.⁶

13For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” This is a quotation from Joel where the prophet envisions a time of judgment and salvation in the messianic age, with the Spirit pouring down on all flesh and a remnant of Israel being saved. This text was also the springboard of Peter’s inaugural sermon in Acts, where calling on “the name” of the Lord was linked with action: “You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Luke 4:1-13

We always hear the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert on the first Sunday of Lent. This year we hear it from Luke whose primary intention seems to be to provide Jesus’ followers with an example of stalwart obedience and complete reliance on God.

1Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert This is a most sacred story for it can have come from no other source than Christ’s own lips. This desert was a terrible wilderness sometimes called “The Devastation.” The hills were like dust heaps; the limestone looked blistered and peeling; the rocks were bare and jagged and it glowed with heat like a furnace.¹⁵

2for forty days, The duration of Jesus’ fast and our Lenten season. This reminds us of the forty days spent by Moses on Sinai. The forty days’ journey of Elijah and the 40 days of Jesus in the desert are deliberate imitations of the 40 years of Israel in the desert.⁴ **to be tempted by the devil.** Note that 1000 temptations don’t add up to one sin—if they are resisted! In fact, temptations, as difficult as they are, can be the cause of our greatest good because by resisting temptations to sin, we develop the habit of virtue. The way we fight temptations is by prayer, helping others, fasting, not dialoguing with temptation, having the words of God’s Scripture on our lips, putting our trust in the Lord and resisting small sins that lead to greater ones. These are positive virtues in themselves.¹ The temptations were meant to divert our Lord from His task of salvation through sacrifice. Instead of the Cross as a means of winning the souls of men, Satan suggested three short cuts to popularity: an economic one, another based on marvels, and a third, which was political.¹⁴

He ate nothing during those days and when they were over he was hungry. Fasting is one of the three pillars of Christian spiritual practice (along with prayer and almsgiving).¹⁶ (CCC 1434) The connection between fasting and being filled with the Spirit is not apparent to most contemporary Christians. The true purpose of our Lenten fast is to encourage us toward fullness of the Spirit. Fasting makes us alert and attentive, ready to detect the thousand signs of the Spirit’s movement in our lives.⁸

3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” This temptation of the devil symbolizes the desires of the flesh.¹¹ Remember that Satan is a real being and his temptation of Eve in the Garden and of Jesus in the wilderness is not to be dismissed as just a symbol or an idea.¹³

4Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live on bread alone.’” Jesus’ responses are all quotations from the book of Deuteronomy.¹² God’s Holy Word is a very powerful offensive weapon that is provided in the Christian’s armor. (Ephesians 6:17)

5Then he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. This refers to political domains, but Jesus rejects a political messiahship.³

6The devil said to him, “I shall give to you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish.

7All this will be yours, if you worship me.” This temptation offers Jesus power over earthly kingdoms which symbolizes the lure of the world.¹¹ For mankind, this category of temptation refers to the idolatrous love of things.¹⁴

8Jesus said to him in reply, “It is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve.’” Jesus here reveals his identity.

9Then he led him to Jerusalem, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said 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 guard you,’ The devil reasons that if God commanded the angels to protect David (Ps. 91:11) from stubbing his foot, how much more would God protect the Messiah who is “God’s Son” if he throws himself headlong from the Temple height.

11and: ‘With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” This temptation is a symbol for the deadliest sin, pride.¹¹ Jesus rejects the proposal to be the Messiah of the gaudy and the marvelous, even though that is the kind of a Messiah many people want. Salvation is to be attained in the humble and at times sorrowful way of faith.³

12Jesus said to him in reply, “It also says, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.’” Jesus is tempted three times by Satan who uses food, power, and death to try to shift Jesus off his path of suffering. The ancient serpent tempted Adam and Eve with the same three items: food, power, and death. The evil one suggested to Eve that she should eat the fruit (food) of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve responded that they were told that if they ate of that tree they would die. Satan responded that they wouldn’t die but would gain the power of gods. Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation, ate the wrong food and tempted death in order to gain divine power. Jesus does just the opposite. He says, “Not on bread alone shall man live,” “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” and “You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone you shall adore.”¹

13When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time. Notice that Luke implies that Satan will return at an opportune time to continue testing Jesus. In fact, we see Jesus contending with the devil elsewhere in Luke. In other words, temptation is a lifelong experience for Jesus, as it is for us.⁸ By conquering every kind of temptation Jesus wanted to show us the methods to use to defeat the devil—prayer, fasting, watchfulness, not dialoguing with temptation, having the words of God’s Scripture on our lips and putting our trust in the Lord.¹¹

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (2) “The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch,” (3) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (4) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (5) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans,” (6) “The Story of Stories” by Karen Lee Thorp, (7) “The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians,” (8) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2004” by Aelred R. Rosser, (9) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke,” (10) “The Gospel of Luke” by William Barclay, (11) “The Navarre Bible: St. Luke”, (12) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (13) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken e3 Marie Finn, (14) “Life Of Christ” by Fulton J. Sheen, (15) “The Gospel Of Luke” by William Barclay, and (16) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church.”

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.