

## From Security to Generosity

Today we begin the season of Lent, a time of preparation leading up to Holy Week and Easter. The writers of our worship resources used a verse from the prophet Isaiah to guide their planning. Isaiah 55:8 reads: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*<sup>1</sup>

The scriptures for each Sunday during Lent reveal a truth about the ways of God, as well as the many ways God's people get it wrong. Scripture after Scripture is about how we think God offers one thing, but what God really offers looks quite different. We think God offers privilege, but what God really offers is inclusion. We think the world works on the basis of scarcity, but really it works a different way – out of abundance. We think power means control, but really it is about solidarity.

Lent is a time to repent—to turn from our ways and recommit ourselves to the ways of God as revealed in Jesus. It's a time to deepen faith and strengthen belief. As we make this 40-day journey through a darker season we're preparing to receive and share more fully in the contrasting resurrection light of Easter Sunday.

This year, Lent begins with two wilderness stories. From the Old Testament comes the story of the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness after their exodus from a life of slavery in Egypt. The reading from Deuteronomy 26 describes a ceremony they're to perform after arriving in the land promised to them. From the New Testament comes the story of Jesus in the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil.

Let's look a bit closer at the story from Deuteronomy 26. The children of Israel who had lived as slaves in a foreign land and had been badly mistreated had been set free by God. Now they are living in the land promised to them. They are bringing baskets filled with their bountiful harvests and presenting them to God and the congregation so that God's work can be done on earth. The story they are to tell during the ceremony is the story every Israelite could repeat. It is one which continues to be a foundational story for the Jews – the story of Jacob, oppression in Egypt, and God's deliverance.

In order to move into the future, the people are commanded to take another look at the past. God provided a safe journey out of slavery and out of the wilderness. Their response is to be gratitude and generosity. They acknowledge that everything they have comes from God. God is their deliverer, protector, and provider. The celebration includes the Levites – Israelite people who don't have land and cannot grow grain. It also includes the immigrants among them. This

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022," Leader: Winter 2021-2022, MennoMedia, pp. 37-42; "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2019," *Leader: Winter 2018-19*, MennoMedia, p. 39; Pulpit Fiction <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent1c>; and Becky Horst, "Temptation in the Wilderness," <https://www.goshen.edu/devotions/temptation-in-the-wilderness/>

offering of part of their harvest is a chance for sharing the wealth. The offering comes from God's bounty and is shared with those who have nothing.

Repeating this ceremony each year, remembering their story of deliverance, and sharing generously remind them that they are the people of God, that they can trust God. They need this reminder because time after time when they forget this story, they turn away from God and things don't go well for them.

We too do well to remember and retell our stories. Reminding ourselves and each other of the times we have experienced God's deliverance, protection, and provision helps to strengthen our faith in our current situations. It allows us to loosen our grasp on other sources of security and extend generosity to those who also need deliverance, protection, and provision.

In the story from Luke 4, Jesus provides an example of this. After being baptized by John, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert where he fasts and prays. During his time in the wilderness, Jesus is presented with several personal and political options for his mission.

Luke reports that Jesus is tempted by the devil. The devil is the opposition, the tempter, the adversary or accuser. The devil is the other voice, not God's voice. This adversary asks Jesus – taunts or dares might be better words – to satisfy his physical needs, to grab onto earthly power, and to prove his invincibility.

The tempter offers food to Jesus who must be very hungry by now. This reminds us of the Israelites in the wilderness demanding water. When given water, they demanded food. When given manna, they demanded more. When given quail, they continued to complain. Their fallback response was to abandon God, saying "Let's go back to Egypt, at least there even though we were slaves, we knew what to expect."

But Jesus is faithful, quoting scripture: *One doesn't live on bread alone.*<sup>2</sup> This temptation is about more than food, it's about all manner of material items. In Deuteronomy, this phrase, *One doesn't live on bread alone*, is part of a warning to remember and trust God in times of prosperity as well as in times of scarcity. So Jesus responds to the tempter with the truth that we don't live on material things alone. Later on, Jesus teaches his disciples words that we pray every Sunday: *Give us this day our daily bread.* This is a reminder that daily provisions are gifts that God gives freely to us, not obligations that we demand from God. The tempter asks Jesus to forget that God provides, and challenges Jesus to take matters into his own hands

How do we view material possessions? Do we see them as something to be hoarded or as gifts from God? Like the children of Israel, we do well to remember what God has done and respond to God in gratitude and generosity. Setting aside time for worship reminds us that all of our days belong to God. We give of our time, talent, and money to the church and to the wider community as an acknowledgement that all we have comes from God.

Next, the tempter offers Jesus power. This reminds us of the Israelites demanding a king. Even when warned what would happen if they had a king, they persisted. They soon found out that giving power to an earthly king was not the solution they had hoped for. They discovered that total power corrupts totally.

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 8:3

But Jesus is faithful, again quoting scripture: *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*<sup>3</sup> Jesus refuses to worship the tempter instead of God. Jesus also refuses to accept the kind of power the tempter is offering. The power of this world is a power of dominance, not a power of love and non-violent service. But Jesus is not about conquering using worldly power. Jesus is about saving the world using godly power of love and service.

Although working through political structures and trying to influence policy makers on all levels to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God, are worthwhile and faithful activities, we cannot put our complete faith and trust in them, in political structures and policy makers. We can appreciate our country and do nothing to betray it. We can align with a political party and support a particular candidate. We can choose to obey the laws of the land. But our primary allegiance is to God. Our greatest commitments are to love and serve God with everything we are and in everything we do and to love other people as we love ourselves. Our generosity extends beyond familial, political, and national boundaries.

The last thing the tempter offers Jesus is survival. This time the tempter tries to use Jesus' tactics by quoting scripture to him: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*<sup>4</sup> The tempter demonstrates that knowing scripture and being faithful are two different things. As I pointed out a few months ago, harmful actions can be justified by using – actually, misusing – scripture.

Once again Jesus is faithful responding to scripture with scripture: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*<sup>5</sup> This refers to a time when the Israelites questioned if God was with them. In times of questioning God's presence, some would worship idols and other graven images. Worshiping someone other than God is an incredible temptation to the Jews in Jesus' time, as well, and to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Those who don't participate in emperor worship face isolation, discrimination, and in some cases, death. The temptation is to do anything possible to survive.

For us, it's rarely, if ever, a matter of personal survival. It's more a matter of trust. I wonder what I would do if following God's ways put my life in danger? Would I try to save myself by doing whatever it took or who else it hurt or would I trust that some things are more important than personal survival?

Survival does seem to be one of the greatest temptations the church faces today. Some Christians respond to perceived threats by drawing boundaries ever closer and becoming more strident in confronting voices they deem to be hostile to their particular interpretation of the Bible and the ways of God.

What are we willing to do or not do in order to survive as a denomination or – even closer to home – as a congregation? Are those actions faithful? The delegates at the Mennonite Church USA special assembly in May will make some decisions that are bound to be hurtful to

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 91:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16

some people or cause additional congregations to leave the denomination. Will we choose security or generosity?

How do we trust God to work in our congregation? Is there anything we need to release in order to receive all that God has for us?

Jesus' adversary used Psalm 91 to try to get him to abandon God, but a better use of this psalm is to draw us closer to God. Psalm 91 is a testimony to a life of trust in the midst of uncertainty, fear, and danger. For the psalmist, God is the source of life and rest. God protects like a shield, like a mountain, like a safe house, like a loving home. God protects from diseases, arrows, destruction, evil, even death itself.

These are metaphors for trusting God, not guarantees of success and survival. The world is imperfect. Violence and accidents happen every day, even to the most faithful and best people. This psalm assures us that God is with us in suffering.

In the wilderness, Jesus experiences three temptations, each more intense than the last. Three times Jesus deflects the temptation with a scripture applied creatively and with authority. The devil came to tempt Jesus in his hunger, his neediness. Jesus said his needs were met in the word of God; that was the source of his security. He will trust in God, the source of his identity and recipient of his allegiance.

We too are in relationship with a God who is deeply committed to our well-being. God's faithfulness frees us to confess and to trust, and to experience and anticipate God's saving work in our lives. Once we release some of the things we cling to, things that make us feel secure and self-reliant, but in reality, are fleeting, that's when we receive God's security of being in Christ. That's when we can become generous.

I imagine some Israelites, who had just harvested their first crops, resisted the instructions to give away the first and best portion of what they had produced. They doubted this way of God to give away their first fruits instead of storing them for their future needs. But God's way is to release in order to receive. We don't see the blessings of generosity until we move forward into it, giving of what God has given us, and seeing our way of security transformed into God's way of generosity. What are you holding on to tightly that can now be released, freeing you to be generous?

As we seek God's way, we move from prioritizing our personal security to living with generosity toward our neighbors. May God help us in this way of life. Amen.