



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Lent 1 Year C March 6, 2022
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4: 1-13
Episcopal Visit to St. Paul's, Vancouver

It is great to be with you here at St. Paul's this morning. I am grateful for the ministry of this parish over many years but in particular over the past two years as we have all tried to find meaningful ways to be the Church in unprecedented times. It has been a challenge to say the least, but St. Paul's has sought out many ways to continue to be a place of compassion, care and living out the gospel of Christ. I am grateful to all of you. I am also grateful to your rector, Philip, for his leadership, faith, commitment, and energy both here in the parish and in other places of the diocese. I am also grateful for the ministry of José Luis and the support and guidance Philip and all of you have offered him. I am grateful to those being confirmed, reaffirmed or received at today's service. It is great to be with you.

Maybe you have noticed it as well, but many people are struggling at the moment. Perhaps it is just me and some of the people I know in my life, but it seems bigger than that. The invasion of Ukraine and the scenes coming from that country are shocking and horrifying. We pray for the people, we pray for peace, we pray for new possibilities that reason and compassion would soon win out. And along with that, of course, we continue to be living in a pandemic, even if there is a sense that things are changing, but the weight of it is still a burden on our shoulders. After two years of living with separation and masking and fear, it affects us, bothers us, disturbs us, knocks us off our axis. But then add in climate change, drug overdoses, discovery of grave sites on the grounds of former residential schools and it starts to feel a bigger weight and presence on our shoulders.

And I guess I could just leave it all there and go and sit down now. And for many people that might just be it. There is no more, just the heaviness and the darkness and the burden of it all. Just the weight of it and the feelings of desolation and emptiness.

But we are here. Here at church. We are grounded and founded upon good news despite what we might be witnessing on our televisions.

The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible reading for today contained this beautiful description of faith and response to God's goodness no matter what the circumstances, no matter what else is going on in the world. Perhaps you noticed it as well. For we heard: "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 fruit of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest... 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."

Notice a couple of things with me. You are to take some of the first fruits... not the leftovers, not the forgotten bits, not the unwanted... this is not an afterthought. Take some of the first fruit, some of the choicest, the most important, the key parts and offer them. Take some of the very best of yourself, and offer it, risk discovering what is most important in life. But notice something else. Offer them to God but you shall do it in this way: 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. The place where God chooses as a dwelling. Where have you discovered to be the dwelling place of God? Perhaps it is this place, perhaps it is in nature, perhaps it is your own heart and soul; but discover that very place where God is known to you, God is present, God is near. That place where even in a pandemic, even in the world of this time and this place, God is recognized. Jesus knew this place well, as the gospel reading today reminded.

"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.... He was hungry, he was starving, he was craving something to ease his body's need for food.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the great kingdoms of the world, in all their magnificence. And the devil said to him, "If you, then, will worship

me, all of it: all the power, all the glory, all the fame, all the prestige, all the money, all the admiration of others, all of it, will be yours.”

Then the devil took him to the pinnacle of the temple, the highest spot, higher than the height of God some thought, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, let’s see what will happen.” 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.... which, if I have learned anything in this world, would mean the very next day.

Those were Jesus’ temptations. Those were the three encounters in the wilderness that stood out for him as he spent forty days in retreat; fasting, praying, contemplating, reflecting upon what God was calling him to be and do. Three temptations that reflected those things that might pull him away from knowing with great depth the dwelling place of God.

Now Jesus was the Son of God and so we could see this as kind of a showdown between the evil in this world and the Messiah and leave it at that. The conversation that we take note of in the Bible is interesting, but how does it connect with our lives? Surely, we do not experience these kinds of encounters. Only every day.

The lure of great power and riches. The lure of fame and fortune. The lure of looking more youthful, more elegant, more fit, more attractive. The lure of having the most desired home, the most desired vehicle, the most recognized fashion. The lure of being all wise, having our act together, of independence, of needing to be right. The fear of looking foolish, the fear of people learning what we are really like, the fear of our own self-doubts taking over. We are bombarded with this all the time. Advertisements of all kinds come to us and can challenge our thinking of what life is really all about and what is most important and what is God calling us to do. But there are many sources to temptation and often they are related to our own insecurities, our own hurts, our own pains, our own desire to ease our aching souls. But it seems that most of us don’t really want to hear this.

Fred Craddock tells the story of being a minister in a small town and if you have ever been in a small town well away from the bright lights of the city you know that there will be a coffee shop there that is the central gathering place for the community. If it is a farming area you will notice that on a Sunday morning in particular, the parking lot of said coffee shop is filled with pick-up trucks of all sizes and ages. Farmers will come and talk about the weather, the crops, the prices of this that or the other thing. It is a real gathering place away from the churches on a Sunday morning.

Fred Craddock said that he knew all about this group in the town in which he served and the patron saint of the group that met at the café was named Frank. This is how Fred Craddock describes the scene: “Frank was seventy-seven when I met him. He was a good, strong man, a pioneer, a rancher and a farmer. He was born in a sod house; he had his credentials, and all the men there at the café considered him their patron saint. “Ha! Ol’ Frank will never go church.” I met Frank on the street one time. He knew I was a preacher, but it has never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just was shaking hands and visiting with him, but he took the offensive. He was not offensive, but he took the offensive. He said, “I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business. Far as I’m concerned, everything else is fluff.” ...I didn’t bother Frank. That’s why I, the entire church and the whole town were surprised, and the men at the café church were absolutely gobsmacked when old Frank, seventy-seven years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning for baptism. I baptized Frank. Some of the talk in the community was, “Frank must be sick. Guess he’s scared to meet his maker. They say he’s got heart trouble. Going up there and being baptized, well, I never thought ol’ Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared...” All kinds of stories.

But this is the way that Frank told it to me. We were talking the next day after his baptism, and I said, “Uh, Frank, you remember that little saying you used to give me so much: ‘I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business?’”

He said, “Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot.”

I said, “You still say that?”

He said, “Yeah.”

I said, “Then what’s the difference?”

He said, “I didn’t know then what my business was.” Fred Craddock said, “He discovered what his business was—to serve human need.....”

What is our business? Well, I would say that this season of Lent is all about spending a little more time sorting that out and reflecting upon it more than usual.

Acknowledging the worries and pains of this world that weigh on our hearts but also where God is calling us closer to discover more about living into holiness. Working out what are the first fruits of ourselves that we need to offer in the dwelling place of God. Trying to recognize those temptations, those things that lure us, those things that take so much of our attention, those things that draw us away from seeing that we are called to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves and live that to the fullest and maybe wonder a lot more about why it is so hard for us to do this.