

“Don’t Jump!”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

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February 14, 2016

Remember when you were wandering, remember when you were rescued, remember when you were provided the land for this harvest. Remembering what God has done for their ancestors is what the people of Israel were to speak when they presented their offerings of the first fruits of the harvest. Most of all, they are to remember who provided the land, and to whom the land still belongs.

Molly will read the instructions of the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 26:1-11, and I will read the words of the one presenting the offering:

*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, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.’*

*<sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.*

We now turn to a reading in Romans, in which Paul writes, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” I will admit I often avoid this verse for I have heard it quoted to contend only Christians are saved, a word that itself has varied interpretations within our faith tradition.

Yet, Paul is actually referencing a verse in Deuteronomy in which Moses speaks of the law as “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” (30:14) So as we hear these words, we are not being given a prescription for a faith statement, but encouraged to trust the one who first gave the law, and has now given Jesus Christ. Romans 10:8b-13:

*“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);<sup>9</sup> because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.<sup>11</sup> The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”*

*<sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup>For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

I am spending more time than normal introducing our lessons, but I think it provides a framework for the message that emerges from them. Now, we turn to the temptations of Jesus. The tempter is the devil, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make it clear the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. In other words, God is in charge.

Also to be noted is Jesus is going to be tempted to do some good things – changes stones to bread so people would not be hungry; and rule over the entire empire so the oppressive Romans could be ousted. If you are an “ends justifies the means” person, it may be hard to understand why Jesus did not take the bait the devil offers as they exchange quotes from Scripture. That is part of what we will seek to discover, as we hear Luke’s account of Jesus’ temptation in 4:1-13:

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>10</sup> for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’<sup>11</sup> and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Memories of Lent are often about eating fish on Fridays, or the practice of giving something up for the season. Having grown up in a Catholic neighborhood, I was very aware of such practices; yet, being Presbyterian, I enjoyed the freedom from such demands. I could keep eating meat on Friday, and did not have to give up chocolate or other treats. Curiously, this resulted in feelings of both smugness and jealousy.

As Protestants began to rediscover Lent as a season of penitence and self-reflection, an alternative to the “give up for Lent” practice emerged. Instead of denial, the thought was to add something at Lent. Rather than give up a food or pleasure, the idea was to take on a practice, from setting aside time for daily prayer or devotion, to embracing a regular exercise program.

Yet, in the end, whether one gives up chocolate or cake, endures a daily trek on the treadmill, or sits for fifteen minutes in prayerful silence, the focus of such disciplines is often on ourselves. That is not to say we are not doing something good in watching what we eat or seeking to be more fit, or even having a Lenten practice of daily Scripture reading. I am not even suggesting we stop doing so, but our lessons this morning seek to alert us to the warning signs of legalism.

Paul wrote to the Roman Church about how God sent the law to be received as a gift to the people. What happened was following the requirements of the law became a prideful measure of personal faithfulness. In other words, if I obey the food laws, and make my offerings and say the right words when I present them; if I regularly go to synagogue, and I fast and pray and give alms to the poor, then God will be pleased – with me! And God will come close – to me! And God will provide protection and blessings – for me!

It would seem there is a human inclination or desire to have clear directions about both the rituals and practices of faith, and in our everyday lives. We may say, “Just tell me what to do to earn the promotion, or receive the raise, or be accepted into the college or graduate program. Just give me the directions, the rituals, the Lenten practice that will make God notice, earn God’s favor, and bring God close.”

Therein lies the problem. In our desire for clear directions, we fail to remember God is already close. It is not up to us to bring God close, and particularly not by our rituals and practices. God is already close. What we are to do is trust God is close.

In his biblical commentary on Romans, Paul Achtemeier writes that the goal of the law was to engender trust in God, not define Israel’s contribution to the relationship with God. [Achtemeier, Paul, Romans, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 169] It is an important distinction, in that God was already close, through the law, and there was no need for the people to create a hierarchy of closeness based on their own achievements.

So, in any Lenten ritual or practice we observe, may it steer clear of centering on us and be aimed at enhancing our trust God is already close to us. Again, we cannot induce God’s favor or closeness. God is here, and our challenge is to trust God is close to us even in wilderness times, and then have our lives reflect it.

When our lives reflect God’s grace we know in Jesus, it becomes our confession with our lips and our hearts – not just in the words we speak, but the trust with which we speak them. It is this trust people sense.

This theme of trust is on full view in Jesus’ own wilderness temptations. Again, at least two of the temptations are seductive. Turn stones into bread and you will be able to feed people in this land prone to drought and famine – people will love you. Just worship me and all the lands and empires you can see will be under your control – you will be a liberating Messiah, overthrowing the Roman emperor. People will love you.

What Jesus is being tempted to do is be someone he is not. He is tempted to set aside the trust he has in God’s purpose for him while a human on this earth. How tempting to feed all the people with bread, and to overthrow Augustus Caesar – and be loved as the liberator. The final temptation, to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, is a test of Jesus’ willingness to test God.

A part of me wonders if the human Jesus knew exactly what was ahead for him, even fully knowing what God's intentions were for his life. A part of me almost hopes he did not, for if he could resist the temptations without being fully sure, then it offers hope for me when we are in such wilderness times, when we find ourselves caught in the strange land of not being sure we are the self God intends, but also not sure exactly what God does intend for our lives.

At such times of uncertainty it is tempting to reach for something that seems great, or even to test God by jumping. Yet, then comes that voice that says, "Don't jump!" Even if we do not know what is coming next, even if Jesus was not completely sure what was coming next in his life, we, as did he, can sense what God does not intend, and so we don't jump!

Just as Jesus did not take the bait and jump from the pinnacle of the temple, tempting God's angels to catch him and protect him as gracefully as a parachute landing, so we are warned not to jump into the temptation of being something or someone we are not. Don't jump into the lure of success or power. Don't jump! Don't jump from the place where God is already close to you.