

Bread Alone

Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On Wednesday night, we gathered here to mark the beginning of Lent. I spoke the words, “Remember that you are dust, and that to dust you shall return.”

I never like saying these words. I don’t particularly enjoy telling people that they are sinners and that they’re going to die!

On Thursday morning, I began preparing for a funeral that I will do on Tuesday for a family in our community.

The woman who died had a hard life characterized by poverty, conflict, and mental illness, just to name a few of her challenges.

Her obituary was a single sentence: “_____, a loving mother, passed away on February 26, 2022, at the age of 68 years.”

On Friday morning, I turned on my phone to see a text from a young man telling me that his father had died in the night (some of you will remember him as worshiped with us a few weeks ago).

“My dad’s gone” was all it said. Three words on a screen, heartbreaking in their devastating simplicity.

Remember that you are dust and that to dust you shall return.

Lent is traditionally a season of penitence, of self-denial, of prayer and preparation.

During Lent, Christians pay special attention to the barren parts of the world and our lives, the bleak places, the windswept and parched places, the sad and lonely places, the places where grief and failure haunt our steps.

We say that God is encountered in these places, too. Perhaps even in unique ways. There is a stark clarity that is sometimes only available in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, many saints down through the ages have come to realize what it is to rely on God alone, to know that ultimately it is God alone who can save.

As I pondered these two deaths in the immediate aftermath of Ash Wednesday, as I thought of the death and grinding violence of war in the Ukraine, as I thought of the pain and isolation many have endured over these last two years of pandemic (it is almost exactly two years ago that the word “covid” entered our lives!), as I thought of the many people in our church and in our community who are struggling these days...

I thought, yes, there are things about our world our particular time that feel a bit “wilderness-y.” This is true every year. This year it just somehow feels more acute.

Our theme for Lent this year is “Seeking God’s Ways.” The prophet Isaiah famously said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

And it’s true.

We think we understand God. We think we know what God wants, how God works, what God is up to in our world and our lives.

And yet we don’t. At least not fully or as often as we might think.

Each Sunday during Lent, we will focus on one area of faith and life in which God invites us to move from our ways to God’s ways.

This Sunday, our theme is “From security to generosity.”

Our gospel text is the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan when he is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit.

There, for forty days, he eats nothing and is tempted by the devil. At the end of these forty days, the devil offers Jesus three temptations.

1. Turn these stones into bread!
2. Bow down and worship me and I will give you authority over all the earth!

3. Throw yourself down from the temple and demonstrate that you are the son of God!

Jesus resists all three temptations. He returns, filled with the power of the Spirit, to Galilee to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

It's a well-known story.

But as is so often the case, there is a lot going on underneath the surface in this passage.

The first hearers/readers of this story would have heard all kinds of echoes from earlier parts of the biblical narrative.

To begin with, this is not the first time we have heard of the devil whispering in the ears of God's children.

Way back in Genesis, we remember, the serpent saying to Adam and Eve... *Go on, choose your own way... It's OK... God can't be trusted... He doesn't want your eyes to be opened so that you will see good and evil as he does...*

And of course, we know how the story ends—with Adam and Eve yielding to temptation and being exiled from Eden in bitterness and shame.

Secondly, the theme of “wilderness” would have been a very familiar one for the first hearers of this story.

They would have instantly made the connection between Jesus' forty days in the wilderness and Israel's forty years in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on the mountain, etc.

For Israel, the wilderness in between Egypt and Canaan was a time of testing, a time when they frequently stumbled and failed, grumbling against the Lord, fashioning idols, and failing to trust.

The two-fold point would have been clear enough.

Jesus was faithful where Adam was not, resisting the temptations of the devil where the first humans had given in (a point Paul brings out more fully in Romans 5).

Jesus was faithful where Israel was not, persevering through the harshness, the loneliness, and the struggle of the wilderness without giving into grumbling and idolatry.

Jesus is re-enacting the story from creation and fall to Israel and exile—in a sense, undoing the tragedy of human sin and folly.

Jesus is the new Adam, the new Israel, the truest expression of what humanity was meant to be and to do. He is redeeming and reclaiming the entire human story and launching it into a new way forward.

This text is not a story about Jesus heroically resisting temptation and a call for us to go and do likewise.

This is how I have often heard this passage preached. I've even heard it as a kind of lesson in the importance of memorizing the bible! *Jesus resisted temptation by quoting the Scriptures and so can you!*

Before *any* of that, this passage is a statement about Jesus' identity and about the scope of what God is doing and will do through him.

Only after we say that this text is primarily about Jesus and his identity can we move on to the practical wisdom that we can apply to our lives in this passage.

And what do we see that we can apply to our own lives, our own experience in the wilderness?

One thing stands out. Jesus refuses to use God as a means to an end. He resists the temptations to do good things for the wrong reasons.

To be clear, the devil does offer Jesus good things.

Stones into bread? Feed a hungry world.

The kingdoms of the world? Use power and authority for good instead of evil.

A supernatural sign of divine provision and protection? Eliminate doubt once and for all.

Who better than Jesus, after all, to be trusted with material provision, political power, and supernatural protection? Who better than Jesus to demonstrate that God wants people to be fed, governed well, and safe?

Yet Jesus refuses to use God. In each case, he resists the quick fix, the easier road, the spectacle.

One does not live by bread alone.

Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

In each case, Jesus casts himself back upon the God whose ways are not our ways.

This is an expression of deep trust.

Even in the wilderness, even when things seem most desperate, even when he is at his weakest and most vulnerable, Jesus trusts God alone with his life and with his future.

And so should we.

Our second reading today comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. It, too, is a cry to God alone as the source of salvation.

No one who believes in him will be put to shame. 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. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

While there is much that we don't understand about God's ways this side of eternity, what Paul sees clearly from the other side of Christ's death and resurrection, is that God is generous.

Anyone who cries out to God will be saved.

It's not about a technique, it's not about attaining a certain level of moral performance, it's not about memorizing the right bible verses bible or getting our theology perfectly sorted out or making sure we do and say all the right things so that God will bless us.

No matter who we are or what we think or how we imagine that God works in the world. No one who believes in Jesus will be put to shame.

And so, on this first Sunday of Lent, we are invited to move from the imagined security of own efforts to the very real generosity of a God has ultimately given us everything in Jesus Christ.

On Friday morning, I was knuckling down to write this sermon. I was scanning some of my past sermons from the first Sunday of Lent.

I had sent the title of my sermon out the previous day, the bulletin was being printed.

And I made a rather unpleasant discovery. I had used this exact same title in a sermon on this same passage six years ago.

Evidently my brain wanders down familiar tracks. An occupational hazard, I suppose. Or maybe I've just finally run out of sermon titles!

Well naturally, I had to figure out a way to redeem the situation! I had to find a way to use "Bread Alone" differently in 2022 than 2016.

In 2016, I focused on our tendency to settle for bread alone. To settle for whatever meager security we can get, to make our worship of God conditional upon what God can provide for us here and now.

In 2016, "Bread Alone" was an ironic title. We cannot and do not live on bread alone.

In 2022, it struck me that the title need not be purely ironic. It can be an expression of the deepest truth of the gospel.

Jesus doesn't tell the devil the whole story in the wilderness when he says, "people do not live on bread alone" (Luke 4:4).

John 6:32-33, 48-51:

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world..."

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

In the most ultimate sense, we *can*, and we *do* live on bread alone. With this, we appropriately move to the table.

Amen.

