

Guest Preacher—St. John the Evangelist, Kula, Hawai'i

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

[Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16]

[Romans 10:8b-13]

Luke 4:1-13

Slowing down and giving up this Lent

Prayer

O saving, healing, and liberating God,
Who led your people through the wilderness
and brought them to the promised land,
a land flowing with milk and honey;
so guide us that, following Christ our God,
we may walk through the wilderness of this world,
and be brought to the glory of the world to come. **Amen.**

Introduction

Story: "Sometimes, you need someone else to remind you to slow down."

Chicken on the way to the middle school after returning home to retrieve some food for the Faculty Book Club gathering that was meeting after school.

I was rushing, which is unusual for me.

The chicken, with its babies, became scared and agitated and even started to follow me as I scampered off, apologetically saying, sorry, sorry, as I carried my box back to the library.

— spoken, ad. lib

My busyness, my rushing, meant that I almost trampled on the hopes and dreams of one Maui chicken and her beautiful baby chicks. My being caught up in myself, the moment, and what I needed to do, meant that I became so absent-minded—for a time—that it became all about me. I lost that connection to God's environment and God's creatures that is so important.

Today, as we arrive at the First Sunday in Lent, this Sunday marks for us a time of slowing down and giving up. As our Ash Wednesday observance reminded us a few days ago, we are all made of the same material—the same stardust—as every other human being—indeed every living creature, every single thing in the universe. So, this Lent is the great equalizer. Kind of like death and taxes. Lent invites us into remembering this equality in an organic kind of way, a way in which we might reconnect to the *aina*—to the fabric of life beneath our feet. Lent reminds us that, we too a made of God, made—like the universe—of God's intent and purpose and of God's most fundamental of matter. Today's readings, friends, help us be situated in this holy season. A season, not for itself, not for mere observance or performative religion, but for us and for others. A Scriptural Lent for the world and all creatures and communities.

Gospel

“After his baptism, 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.”

Luke's account of Jesus's time in the wilderness—the desert of 1st century Palestine—is clearly and boldly declared a time of prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit. Just before this account, we've experienced the coming together of God's different Trinitarian expressions in the waters of Jesus's baptism. Mother-Father-Creator/Spirit-Wind-Dove/Son-Incarnate-Divine—these three form the three-fold nature of God that Christians so powerfully understand as expressing the fullness of God's love in the universe. Interestingly, in Luke, it is the moment in which Jesus is praying which opens up the transcendent moment that we may be familiar with:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Note that Jesus is a full, active, and participatory person in the experience of communal baptism. Jesus comes to be baptized by John, and was praying as a disciple of John, as a child of God, as a seeker of the truth, and as one who sought to discern God's call. Perhaps it was the intentional, slowing down and reconnecting in prayer, the beautiful, thin space of a human fully alive and fully engaged with the Divine, that allowed Jesus to be swept up in that mysterious voice from heaven through which the Trinitarian mystery is revealed.

I wonder: are we able to see, to trust, that the slowing down of our lives through prayer can be this place for us? Are we, in the complications and challenges in our lives, able to give up the need to do it all on our own and lean into the reality of God's loving presence?

“After his baptism, 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.”

Jesus encounters temptation in the wilderness, directly after his baptism. It's such a contrast—this going from the highest of highs—spiritually, physically, mentally—to the lowest of lows in all those aspects too. In the desert of Palestine, Jesus goes without food, survives on little water, and (no doubt!) experiences the trials of mental confusion and delusion. I've come to imagine, that this personified devil who appears in Luke, is Jesus's mind, body, and spirit, communing with the most challenging aspects of human existence—when that very human Jesus is brought to the edges of what is reality and what is not. Yet in the haze, in the lacking of mental clarity (and the practicalities of life like food, water, and shelter), there Jesus finds a way to reconnect to God, reconnect to creation, and reconnect with prayer.

Hebrew Scriptures

Deuteronomy, like many of the books of the bible, takes up, gathers together, and reinterprets other narrative fragments which emerge as important to God's people over time. This morning we heard about the land of milk and honey (a phrase used twice in just a few verses), a land that is the so-called, “promised place” of God's people. Yet, as these things go, the land is already occupied, and God's people quickly immerse—not just as escaping slaves from an oppressive government—but as occupiers and oppressors themselves. Deuteronomy is the record of God's people—yes, but it's also a record of the colonizer, who sees for themselves a particular type of liberation—a particular type of freedom—which is blinded by their own need to be saved.

This dynamic is, as you well know, the way of the world. And while it may be easy to pin this ego-filled blindness onto a few strongmen like President Vladimir Putin, or General Secretary President Kim Jon-un, again, I think we know, that the world is much more complicated than that. The human need for biological fulfillment—whether of the innate desire to reproduce (that many, yet not all of us possess), or the biological desire to control and shape the environment around us—whether that be the placement of the blender in the kitchen or the particular way the fridge magnets are arranged—reminds us that we too are seekers of control and power. So, despite how evolved we may be. Despite how wise and intellectually gifted the human-animal has become over hundreds and thousands of years, humans get blinded by the desire to control that which we cannot control. No different from the blinkers on a racehorse, this directs our gaze, our attention, and indeed all our energy in a singular direction. Yet, unlike a racehorse, who is utterly faithful and naively dedicated to the cause of the finish line, we find our blindness expressed in a thousand different ways as indifference to suffering; as impatience at incompetence; and as an extraordinary propensity to beat ourselves up for not doing a good job—not being perfect, as if we were supposed to be God ourselves.

Conclusion

The beginning of the Lenten journey marks our journey back into the desert with Jesus. Our Gospel today and this morning's reading from Deuteronomy, remind us of the humanness of our limitations and the invitation of this Holy Season of Lent: to slow down and give up the need for control. Prayer is the perfect expression of this.

Modeled by Jesus, practiced by millions of faithful in countless religions around the world, prayer intentionally reconnects us to the Source—the Divine. This source, this Divine Life reconnects us—in fact, always connects us if we are able to glimpse it—to every creature under heaven and on earth. This source, this Divine Love, and joy—connects us to every part of God’s Good Creation—every fundamental element of universal matter. Let’s pray that this prayer, itself, may invite us into a spirit of letting go. Of the taking of the blinders. Of reconnecting with ourselves at the deepest part of our innate, Spirit-filled existence. And may this Lent, in this way, be our land of milk and honey. A land which God creates in which we can let God simply love us—and where we can learn what it is to truly be free.