

## First Sunday of Lent (C)

February 17, 2013

If I were to ask you what comes to mind when I say “Lent,” what would you say? Some likely responses might be “penance,” or “a time to give things up,” or “the season for going to confession.” Ashes do seem to be a good symbol for Lent, reminding us of the passing nature of our lives, and calling us to reflect on how we are managing our dwindling days. But I would propose a living, beating, healthy, loving heart as the symbol of Lent. Lent is the season of awakening our hearts. “Rend your hearts, not your garments,” cries the prophet Joel on Ash Wednesday. And today’s readings reinforce this cry.

Each year Lent begins with the story of the three temptations in the desert. Jesus, led into the desert by the Spirit, is being tested by Satan. To every temptation that Satan throws out, Jesus has an answer. For every trap Satan sets, Jesus finds an escape. At issue is what will control the heart of Jesus. The first temptation has to do with control over things. Satan says, “You’re hungry. Use your power. Change these rocks into bread.” The second temptation is to control people. Satan whispers, “I will give you power over all the kingdoms of the world, just worship me.” And the third temptation is to control God, forcing God’s intervention. “Leap off the Temple,” Satan coaxes. “God will take care of you.”

To all three snares, - things, people, God - Jesus responds by quoting the book of Deuteronomy, the great book of the Pentateuch that calls Israel to be a people of the covenant, to give their hearts to God, to trust that the God who led them out of slavery would continue to take care of them. Israel in the desert again and again fails the tests that come. The people complain about the lack of food, complain about Moses, and at one point even complain that God brought them out to the desert to let them die.

But Jesus in the desert is the ideal Israel, refusing to turn from trusting God. He says in short order: My real food is the bread of God's Word. The only one I worship is God. I do not test God. Jesus neither seizes control for himself nor yields it to Satan. It is the Father that remains in control. Jesus only yields to the will of his Father.

Scholars say this event is shorthand for the temptations Jesus had to deal with all through his ministry: To use his powers for his own benefit – whether to nourish his body or his ego. To use his powers to win the crowd for himself. To ask the Father to do things according to what Jesus saw as best. There is no more dramatic example of this yielding of control than at Gethsemane, when he prays, "Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done."

Lent begins by reminding us that Jesus made the decision over and over again to seek the will of God and to do that will. His heart was firmly rooted in the will of the Father. We see him making a profession of faith in God, his Father.

This same note of professing faith in God is sounded in the other two readings. Moses is telling the people that on the day they offer the fruits of the harvest, when they give their offerings to the priest who, in turn, will set them before the altar, on that day the people are to profess their faith before God. They are to declare before God their story of how God saved them from the oppression of Egypt, and delivered them with strong hand and outstretched arm, and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. God is to be trusted, and they are to profess publicly their trust.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Again, a call to the Christians at Rome to acknowledge publicly where they place their hearts, to whom they dedicate them. And God's response? The gift of salvation.

Lent is a time to ready our hearts to make a profession of faith. We will do this on Easter. In an age when so often we are not sure whom to believe, or who tells the truth, or whether the truth can be found, we are called to be individuals and a people who tell the truth, both to God and to one another.

For this reason every Easter we renew our baptismal promises, which declare that we believe in God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that we will live as children of God. Every Easter we renounce Satan and all his promises and all his works. For the next forty days we prepare our hearts to do this. “Rend your hearts,” cries Joel. Peel away the tough rind that can surround our heart. Peel away the rind of indifference, the tough skin that hardens our heart, created by holding on to resentment, anger, cynicism, and all those attitudes that weaken our ability to love God and our neighbor.

So, today let us resolve to turn to the Lord with all our heart, our mind, and our soul. Every Eucharist is a pledge of God’s love and loyalty to us. Jesus does not abandon us but draws near to feed and nourish us. May this Lent be truly a season of a heart renewed, of falling in love once again with our God.

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