

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 ~ Luke 4:1-13
Full to the Brim: Even in the Desert
First Sunday in Lent ~ Holy Communion ~ March 6, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis
Communion Meditation

Introduction:

Lent began long ago as a chance to step back, take a breath, take stock. A season that invites us to leave our old life behind. To fast and prepare to be baptized into a new way of living. In essence, this was a practice of stepping away, of saying “no” to corrupt power, of saying “no” to the scarcity mentality of our culture (you know, where we are barraged with constant messaging that we always need more), *and* to stop going through rituals that have become empty and meaningless. Instead, we are invited to choose to live a more expansive life, that is filled with faith, fueled by the Holy Spirit.

This Lenten series we begin today, “Full to the Brim” is an invitation into a different kind of Lent, into a full life. It’s an invitation to be authentically who you are, to counter scarcity and injustice at every turn, to pour out not less, but more grace wherever it is needed. Remembering that we’ve done nothing to deserve or earn this grace, and yet, like water, it spills over. Thanks be to God.¹

Today, you are going to need a swig of water as we head into the wilderness with Jesus in our gospel reading from Luke. Our first stop is the very opposite of a land flowing with milk and honey. This threshold is not full of baskets of first fruits bounty. Yet Jesus was filled with something *else* that kept him on track, as he faced his first challenge still literally wet behind the ears, from his baptism in the river Jordan.

Communion Meditation:

This was a big week for our almost four-year-old granddaughter, Isabel. On Monday she was deemed old enough at her daycare to go with the “big kids” (the four- and five-year old’s) to the park, instead of participating in naptime with the younger kids, toddlers, and babies. She had arrived! But then on Thursday, at the playground with the big kids, she took a nasty spill off the spiral, metal climbing bar. The gash in her cheek looked like it needed stitches, so her mom, our daughter, Emily, was called and they headed to the Emergency Room at a nearby hospital.

During the next four hours at the hospital, at one point, they had three medical people, and a “child diversion” person (her whole job seemed to be distract and entertain child patients) along with her mom, working together to restrain Isabel in order to give her just two stitches. Apparently, the doctor in training sewed the first stitch incorrectly, so it had to be extracted and restitched. You can imagine Izzy loved that. They finally got home way past her usual bedtime. On Friday afternoon we got a Facetime call from Emily and Isabel, whose face looked mostly fine, sporting only a brightly colored Band-Aid on her cheek. She started in, “Grandpa Bob and Nana, I want to tell you about the worst day of my life.” True to the bone, for her.

On a more serious note, this *has been* one of the worst weeks in the life of our world. We have witnessed the unfolding devastation cause by the unprovoked, aggressive invasion of the Ukraine by Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia. Ten days into the Russian invasion, its sustained assault has set off the fastest-moving exodus of European refugees since World War II. It is with hearts heavy from the knowledge of massive suffering and loss for children, teens, as well as the grown-ups caught up in this conflagration, we turn to God for help and hope. Where are you leading us, Holy Spirit, this day?

I can only imagine that the encounter Jesus had with the devil on day 40 in the wilderness *was* the worst day of his life, *so far*. This encounter was, perhaps, preparing him for even worse days that lay ahead. Luke ends this story ominously, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." On this side of the cross, we know there would be more tests for Jesus and they would be worse. This points to a truth about our lives of faith as well. As much as we might wish that our temptations and trials could be a one and done, we know this is not really how it goes. Trials and tests, where we are called to choose to say "yes" or "no" await us at every turn until we take our last breath on this earth.

For Jesus, his forty days in the wilderness and his dust-up with the devil right occur right before he begins his ministry on earth. Kind of like what we know as a "vision quest." The cultural and spiritual practice of various indigenous nations in North and South America that young people go through on their way to becoming an adult. Those too, occur in the literal wilderness, far away from the familiar comforts of "normal life." This kind of test clarifies one's self-understanding and identity. Who am I, and whose am I? What do I really believe? For Presbyterians, we call this "Confirmation Class." Perhaps we are letting them off too easy! I wonder what their "Statement of Faith" would look like after forty days alone in the wilderness with no food... or internet.

Did you notice what famished Jesus *did* have? Only in Luke, are we told, (Luke 4:1) "Jesus, *full of the Holy Spirit*, returned from Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Here's the amazing thing about fullness in the Spirit. We can see from this story, that abundance of the Spirit, the fullness of God's love and grace doesn't diminish, but rather it seems to grow in the face of fasting and testing. Luke makes this point in verse 14. The next verse after the end of our story: after the devil departed from him, he writes, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." (Luke 4:14a) Charged up, and good to go! (Even before his first meal!)

How does that work? How did Jesus go from full to fuller after forty days without food? We can't really know for sure. Nor do we need to. What we need to know is how the verbal takedown by Jesus of the devil in three rounds can coach us in the matches we face this week? As individuals, in our personal relationships and issues, as well as with our social and global challenges of the day. Here's what I've got: This is a story about the power of "no." Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, and not much else, shows us the power the Holy Spirit gives us to say "no." How to resist all the forces and voices that threaten to divert or destroy our core identity. We are God's beloved children, called to be creators of justice and joy. No more and no less. Any

person, group, law, or movement that says otherwise, the Holy Spirit empowers us to stand up and say “no”—Jesus style.

And yet, it is so easy to get derailed! Especially when we are tempted by the shadow side of our God-given gifts. If you think about it, the devil hit hard on the shadow side of Jesus’ gifts: the ability to provide an abundance of bread, Jesus could do that. Or the political power to exact justice. Or the power to protect and care for all. The devil knew how to twist and turn something good into something bad: something not Jesus. And bad for everyone else. We see Jesus, not once but three times, say “no.” Even though the devil attempted to sugar coat each temptation with a veneer of good intent. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, resisted with the “power of no.” Drawing from the tap root of his biblical tradition and spiritual practice.

I am struck by the unexpected strength, resilience, and unity of the Ukrainian people in their resolve to say “no” to Putin’s Russian invasion. Putin’s attempt to wipe out their identity, their understanding of self. Telling them they are not what they think they are. Volunteer citizen brigades are mounting a disproportionate show of strength and resistance that seems like Holy Spirit power, to me. They are saying “no” with all that they have and are. At great cost and sacrifice. The Ukrainians have inspired a welcome turn toward unity within our own nation, and across the freedom loving countries of the world. I believe their resolve to remain true to their core identity as Ukrainians has sparked a flame of reconnection to our own shared identity as USA citizens and the call to claim the power of our democracy.

It is so easy to forget who and whose we are, as a nation and as individuals. Not only in extremely hard times, when we are having the worst day or week or year of our lives. But also, in the extremely good times. When we think we have it made, when we are entering a land of milk and honey where everything is coming up roses. When we are having the best day of our life, who needs God, then?

On those days, a different kind of evil lurks when we think we are on easy street. Trap doors and trip wires are ready to catch our self-satisfied souls. Just when we think somehow that we are the cause of our own success. God knows we do this. That’s why in our Deuteronomy text, as the Israelites were poised to enter the promised land, after 40 years in the wilderness they were commanded to offer their first fruits. And to recite and remember their story: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor... we were slaves, we were oppressed, wandering aliens, a no people.” We must remember our story, our history, especially on our best day.

For them and for us, the ritual giving of first fruits, reminds and remands us: we are God’s beloved children and all we have is from God. Therefore, we *must* share our bounty. I invite you today, when we pass our offering plates this morning, to think about how we are touching a tradition that is over 3,000 years old! We are touching the taproot of our identity as God’s people: This is who we are. And remember who we are not. Whether we give electronically or online, once a month, or once a year, this plate can serve as a tangible reminder of who and whose we are, and the future to which God is calling us.

What is God calling you to say “no” to, this week? At this table, Jesus will fill you to the with the strength and resolve to resist what does not create justice and joy in your life and in our world. The Holy Spirit is our Super Power, on tap, waiting to gush forth to the glory of Christ on earth and beyond.

ⁱ The essence of these two paragraphs is gleaned from the introduction to Sanctified Art’s, “Full to the Brim” Devotional Booklet. A Sanctified Art LLC/sanctifiedart.org. The source for this year’s Lenten theme.