

Sermon: One Does Not Live by Bread Alone

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, March 6, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If one does not live by bread alone, then what does one truly need to live?

A young man was brought up, properly, in the Christian faith. He tithed faithfully, 1/10 of what he was given in allowances from his parents. He tithed faithfully, 1/10 of what he earned on his first summer job. So the Lord blessed him abundantly, through a high tech start-up that quickly grew beyond his wildest dream. Now a multi-millionaire, in a booming business hiring dozens of employees, facing pressures from competitors, customers, suppliers, and of course taxes of considerable multitude and magnitude. This rich young man is having second thought about tithing. Does tithing really mean 1/10? Is it calculated based on gross revenue or net earning? Does it come before taxes or after, as in his case, that does make a huge difference. So he went to his pastor, as he was brought properly in faith, and requests that the pastor would pray to God, on his behalf, for a special dispensation to reduce his tithe to 1/100, calculated based on net earning after tax—thinking even at that level, it would already be a substantial amount to the local church. The pastor thought about the request for a moment, from this rich young man, whom he loved, then replied, “Well, I am not going to do that. But I will pray to God, to bless you with an earning level on par to your faith. Tithing is 1/10, no way around that. If you have a problem, you take it up to God.”

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the period of forty days proceeding Easter. The Lectionary reading take us seemingly in two different directions. The Old Testament reading of Deuteronomy 26, contains instruction on tithing, on giving back to God the first fruit of all produce—a perfect text for a stewardship sermon. Then the Gospel reading of Luke 4, where Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, after enduring hunger and thirst for forty days—a most appropriate text to kick off the season of Lent. Stewardship or Lent, that is the question.

To be honest, I wrestled with this question the entire week. The story I began this sermon with, is a story that I’ve told elsewhere, in another setting, as part of a stewardship campaign—a most appropriate story for Deuteronomy 26. Yet, I have this nagging feeling as if the Spirit is nudging me, ever so gently towards the text in Luke 4, particularly to the statement that Jesus made, “**One does not live by bread alone.**”

Perhaps the connecting point of these two seemingly unrelated texts is the number forty—forty years of wandering in the desert and forty days of hunger in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 26 begins with a conditional clause of ‘when’, as in verse 1, “*When you have come into the land...*” It is an instruction written to project a future, a future certain yet unseen. Traditionally ascribed to the authorship of Moses, the entire book of Deuteronomy should really be understood as a set of instruction, for what life would and should be like, for the community of faith, after 40 years of wandering in the desert.

That 40 years was a harsh journey. The wilderness / desert of Sinai is a hot, dry, and inhospitable terrain that few could survive. Yet God deliberately led the Israelites into that most trying landscape with pillars of cloud during the day, and pillars of fire at night. With manna and quails from heaven and water from rock, God provided the people not with what they wanted but with what they needed. Yet what really sustained the community of faith during all that time, was the presence of God, journeying with them, housed in the tabernacle. For forty years, the people depended on God. For forty years, they enjoyed his presence. For forty years, they learned to trust and obey.

Now, the people of God were about to enter into the Promised Land. “*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, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground...*”. The instruction here does not contain the specific tithe of 1/10—that you find elsewhere in the Bible. However, it does contain the wording of ‘first fruit’—that is the first, the best, the most plentiful harvest. It speaks of a mindset of gratitude, of a tremendously grateful thanksgiving, that the Lord has finally brought us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. A land where the people of God can settle, can grow, can finally celebrate all the good things that God had done, is doing, and will continue to do. That forty years of hardship will become a hindsight, a memory increasingly distant, yet worthy of recall.

Which bring us to the text of Luke 4—the temptation of Jesus. It should be noted that Jesus was also deliberately led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness. The temptation he faced by the devil, was not only permitted by God, it was engineered by God. For forty days, Jesus ate nothing—no milk, no honey, and no bread—while the devil did his work. I can’t even imagine what Jesus endured during those forty days. What was he thinking? How was he feeling? Was he actively trying to escape the wilderness? Or was he journeying deeper into that earthly abyss? Did he feel the presence of God with him? Or was he feeling alone, increasingly thirsty and famish.

After that forty days—an eternity really, and just when you think the worst is over, the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus then answered him, “It is written, *‘One does not live by bread alone.’*”

It should be noted this quotation that Jesus used as a reply, came out of Deuteronomy 8:1-3, which says, *“This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”*

So there you have it, answer to the question I posed at the beginning: **One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.** It is a reply from Jesus, that comes out of the Scripture, comes out of the mouth of the Lord God. It is a reply that acknowledges God’s total sovereignty, in leading one into wilderness, in testing one’s true resolve in one’s heart. It is a reply in hunger, in thirst and in humbleness, knowing that if God tests, God ultimately provides. That reply should’ve been enough to repel any devilish attack, but it wasn’t.

Then the devil led him up, to where we do not know, and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. O what a glorious sight it must have beheld. All the riches, all the might, all the land, all the power within one’s grasp. Then 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

First of all, it is far from certain that the devil has indeed that authority, since all authority rests in the hand of God. But the devil does know corruption in one’s heart. He does understand how greedy we are, how insecure we have become, how easily we are suspect to all sorts of seduction, of fame, of lust, of wealth and of power. So the devil tempted Jesus with the glory of the world, with only one simple condition: worship me.

The posture of worship—with knees bent, body prostrated, hands extended—is the simplest, most basic posture in yoga, given an interesting term ‘childpose’. It is a posture supposedly of relaxation and of restoration—a posture one returns to regularly in yoga. It is also said that human being are made to worship. Our mortality, our limited nature prompts us to worship, whenever we

encounter something unexpected, shocking beyond our imagination or comprehension. Not only that, we actively seek out things to worship, of natural things like trees, rivers, rock formations; or of created things like idols, carvings, icons; or of intangible things like wealth, power, fame. The posture and the gesture of worship is second nature to us.

So facing such an enticing offer of the world's glory, and being asked a simple gesture of human nature, that is to worship, Jesus answered the devil, "It is written, '**Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.**'" An answer that comes also out of Deuteronomy, this time in chapter 6, verse 13-14, "*The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you.*"

Not giving up yet, one last attempt by that devil, as he took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the temple, saying to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, '*He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,*' and '*On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*'

Note this time, the devil quotes words from the Scripture, in Psalm 91:11-12, but out of context. The psalm refers to God's protection if one falls; it does not refer to actively jumping, actively testing the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. Then Jesus answered him, "It is said, '*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*'" Once again, words out of Deuteronomy, in 6:16.

So there you have it. Three simple responses from Jesus that drove the devil away, three simple practices that sustain faith. During this 40 days of Lent, leading to that most glorious Easter, if you are thinking about what to do, or what to give up. Might I suggest that you re-read the book of Deuteronomy, and mediate particularly on these three:

**One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.
Do not put the Lord your God to the test.**

Oh, yes, don't forget to tithe.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.