

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11  
PSALM 91  
ROMANS 10:8b-13  
LUKE 4:1-13

First Sunday in Lent  
March 6, 2022; Year C

***Breading!***

**God wanted no part of it, no part of it all, no part of it in any way whatsoever, no shape, no form! No way! Not today! Not tomorrow! Not next week, next month, or next year! Never! Never! Never! God wanted to stay on the move, a rambler on the open road, or as Willie Nelson croons, “on the road again,” a constantly traveling, sojourning, nomadic deity, a “tabernacling” God, always on the move, the very meaning of the word “tabernacle” all about moving about, freely unbound and let go, completely unshackled and unhindered. As one car company advertised, “It was all about the journey, not the destination!” I am always fascinated by churches that meet in buildings that use the word “tabernacle” in their name, as stationary as those permanent structures always are. My uneducated guess being that they really do not have the slightest clue what the term means or its etymology. An important sidebar for today: Just remember as we explore these texts from the Hebrew Bible that we are interpreting a very anthropomorphic deity, that is, a God who walks and talks and would chew gum if it were available, displaying any and every human habit, quality, or trait, good and bad! This, my friends, was the God of the Hebrews, the way they understood God, as an intuitive people who became the Israelites and who would eventually become the forebears of the faithful, we now know as Jewish, the Jews of the first century referenced in the Christian scriptures, all descriptive of their changing terminology as they continued to evolve as a people. This God wanted no part of a settled, an agrarian, farming, culture, but desperately wanted to proudly**

remain part and parcel of that strong nomadic tradition, continuing to live the adventurous life of a wandering and wondering nomad, just like Abraham who was an Aramean nomad, yes, “that” Aramean, who traversed the ancient Near East, what we typically call the Middle East, perhaps the middle of nowhere back in the day.

I am sure you are all familiar with the bizarre and disturbing story of Cain, the elder, and Abel, the younger, Eve and Adam’s boys. You will remember that in their presumed faithfulness to God, that they both brought their devoted offerings from the field and placed them before the Holy One. Well as fate and the deity would have it, Abel’s offering was joyfully received, graciously accepted with gladness and a grateful heart. The writer benignly states the not-so-obvious, “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep!” In other words, he was a herder, following in the rich nomadic tradition of his people, yes, revealing God’s preferential mode of obtaining food. Abel brought a fatling and a firstling, the fat portions of a sheep, bahhhhhh, a cute little tasty lamb no doubt, God obviously now perceived as a carnivore, the opposite of the creative vegetarian advocating God we read about just a bit earlier in the first two chapters of Genesis. Hold on to those thoughts! And so, along comes Abel’s sibling Cain, surely a trustworthy older brother, proudly bringing forth before God, what the biblical narrative calls the “fruit of the ground,” as opposed to the fruit of the vine! In other words, he brought produce, perhaps wheat or grain or a vegetable of some sort. Cain was obviously a farmer who tilled the land, reflecting the unembraced, unimpressive, settled agrarian lifestyle that had by necessity evolved among this people over quite a lengthy period of time. I love what the text says, matter-of-factly pointing out that God had “regard” for Abel’s offering, while God had “no regard” for Cain’s, seeming to disregard, disrespect, and dismiss this gift outright, as perhaps, ironically if so, the ultimate insult. Just what gives? How ungrateful! How petulant! How persnickety! I told you this God possessed human like attributes! And

theologians and curious Bible readers have inquired ever since, desperately wanting to know the answer to the question if there indeed is one to be found, solving the dilemma of God's blessing of one gift and giver while rejecting, cursing the other. And I believe that there is! By the way, jumping to the end of the story, you will remember that Cain grew angry and took out his anger with God on his innocent and unsuspecting younger brother, after persuading the young lad to join farmer boy in what was probably the very exact field where he labored, making his hard living toiling in the hot sun, slaying Abel on the spot in a momentary fit of rage, the younger brother's warm blood literally crying out from the soil from which Cain made his living. What we have here is the first, first degree murder ever recorded. My theory, based on my broader hospitality research, is that God accepted Abel's offering because it was given out of the traditional and long-standing nomadic ancestry of a people always on the move. Abel's offering was a living and breathing, a succulent, tender, select unblemished animal from the flock, a gift espoused and esteemed by God, all these facts subtly and not-so-subtly revealed, verified in the biblical narrative. I believe that God refused Cain's offering, insultingly so, because it was produce, work product, grains, veggies, or fruit, grown from within this despised and disdainful agrarian society, the foreign fruit from a farmer's hand. It is my story, and I am sticking with it! (Keep reading) You will discover the connection of my interpretation of this story with today's sermon.

I have often thought that preaching prophetically to an unsuspecting Sunday morning congregation, a semi-captive audience, should call for, even demand, a disclaimer, come with a warning label, perhaps a rating system like the movie industry invoked several years ago in an effort to give parental guidance and protect children. I am also reminded of what Annie Dillard said about coming to worship, that we should hand out helmets and flack jackets in case we awake and rouse the sleeping, slumbering, deity, dare disturb the Divine. We

rattle that cage every Sunday at our own risk! Jumping ahead, for these complex reasons God resisted the urges with the alluring, maybe intoxicating, temptation, presented by King David, who first offered to build a Temple for the Holy One, an opulent, magnificent, cornerstone to cement the final settling in Jerusalem, a city once named Jebus, a Canaanite enclave, stolen right out from under them as the centerpiece of the newly established, newly settled, Promised Land. The great city of Jerusalem was recalibrated and retrofitted, newly baptized as Zion, christened as the holy city of God. To settle in Jerusalem, complete with the centerpiece of the centerpiece, in building the beautiful Temple, something that would indeed eventually, perhaps inevitably, happen under King David's successor. Yes, God would relent and give in to these overtures, and it would be David's once illegitimate son Solomon, yes, birthed by Bathsheba, his ill-gotten bride, who would have the honor of constructing the great edifice.

Yes, the Temple would finally and ultimately be brought to fruition under King Solomon's dutiful watch, a people and their God, A God and God's people, conceding, surely rebuking everything the herding forebears of the faith and the nation would in their primordial formative years have never even given a first thought to doing, but were no doubt prepared, clearly warned that it was coming, though certainly coming to fear and expect this major transition in tribal life as an inevitable societal reality. The handwriting and handwringing were on the wall! The die was cast! No looking back, except maybe just a peak! The Bible tells me so! Settling, realistically and metaphorically, was anathema, apostacy, an egregious violation, what the early Church would nastily creatively craft and forever call heresy. And yet, there were the Israelites and so are we, here we are, and wherever we go that is where we are! They stopped on a dime, pulled up their tent stakes and threw away their no-longer-needed tents, making the decision for the ages to put down roots and settle a

land they came to know as promised, God-given, God-blessed, creating an amazing story to rationalize, justify, and explain an emerging nation's existence, what a spin to support what might be described as an irrational rationality, giving all the credit to Yahweh their God who had once dutifully delivered them from bondage through Moses, a prince in Egypt who became a nomadic herder in his own right, and then led them through the adventures of their wilderness exile, a foray leading them to a bountiful land flowing with milk and honey, a land of richest harvest, once reserved for its true and rightful owners, its original inhabitants, the Canaanites, Palestinians being their direct descendants, still on the property—sort of!

To the victors belongs both the spoils and the story, revisionist history providing a wonderful canvas, painting an illusionary, delusional, image, a false narrative providing comfort in the calming and peaceful rearview mirror of life! In similar ways, the Hebrew people would do unto the Canaanites, their newly minted enemies, the very thing the Egyptians had grievously once upon a time done unto them! Though rather than capturing them, forcing them into captivity, these Hebrew pioneering pilgrims sought to slaughter, to annihilate as many of their new foes as they could as they seized this already colonized land, the suggestion of genocide a reasonable argument! Talk about inhospitable actions, inhospitality at its worst! If you can dismiss an enemy as an adversary, you can quickly dehumanize them and do to them as you will! As Voltaire is credited with saying, "Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities!" History, ancient and recent, has shown that horrific axiom to be horrifically true! If you read the lines and between the lines of the Hebrew Bible, you will find these disturbing recollections recorded there for posterity, you will clearly see in the biblical narrative the many atrocities, transparently, in black and white! Conquest on steroids! God said it! I believe it! That settles it! NOT! The numerous

**conundrums so very disturbing and politically incorrect, even insensitive, to dare suggest, but nonetheless terribly accurate! You will not hear this in most pulpits from either side of the theological aisle! It is always our job, all of us, always job one, to critically examine the biblical texts, every text, all of it, and let the proverbial chips fall where they may critically and honestly. Even so, Sadly, unfortunately, when it comes to the Bible, some people cannot handle or do not want to explore a new of different interpretation, anything that challenges their traditional truth. There simply are some people who need to hold on to the security blankets of their Sunday School devotional mythologies. In the short and the long run, everyone pays a price as a result of that kind of stubborn inflexibility and intractability. Occupation is occupation, no matter, and we are not talking career choices here! I must say as a disclaimer, however, fearing, risking that my words might possibly dare to be confused, misinterpreted, or misunderstood. In no way, shape, or form am I equating the actions of tribes and clans from ancient history, comparing them with any events that have been perpetrated in recent history by despots, fascists, tyrants, and the like! I am not making a case for who is right, but rather who is who in these ancient stories! Those disconnected arguments would be futile and stupid, putting anyone who made that assumption, anyone who dared connect those irreconcilable dots, in understandable and justifiable peril. Far different context, far different culture!**

**Ah, Canaan, bright Canaan, the fair and happy land, so many southern harmony songs sing. Ukraine, beautiful Ukraine, the fair and happy land! Oops! Yes, our current circumstances are reminders of many a notorious occupation, Putin (the Terrible) seemingly the reincarnation of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi Germany crusade of terror and torture, the worst atrocities ever, Hitler a murdering thug just like Vladimir Putin his reincarnated offspring! Sadly, his approval ratings are soaring, from 60% to 71% since the start of this awful war, all because**

of a lack of disseminated facts, outright lies, disinformation, propaganda. And suddenly there was an eerie quiet in the room, an uncomfortable hush coming over the people! Oh my! Once again, the die was cast! The fate was sealed! There was no going back! As we have often said, we never can! Yes, life, societal life, historically was and contemporarily remains, complex and complicated, disconcerting and yes, unfortunately most troubling and uncomfortable! Eventually, the Romans would occupy Israel even as the Babylonians once had done back in 587 BCE, including Jerusalem during the time of Jesus, throughout the first century, and beyond, even destroying the temple in a deja vu moment. Here we go again! I am sensing a very alarming human pattern developing during our homiletical discussion and our present disturbing and disgusting, deeply troubling days. We humans never seem to learn from the most painful parts of our history, indeed, causing history to repeat itself time and time again! George W. Bush was wrong, the past is never over!

And so today we read an old, old, story, placed back onto primitive Hebraic beginnings as recorded in the Bible, each narrative carefully placed, projected onto the origins of a people but actually written long after their settlement, their colonization, of a land dispossessed, yes, taken by force, from its original inhabitants. The Deuteronomist proclaims to the people who have come into this land of promise, after having taken possession and having settled it, the writer declaring for all to hear, that these settlers are to take some of the first fruit of the ground, harvested from this land given to them by their God, and put it in a basket and go to a place where God has intentionally, specifically, chosen for God's name to dwell forever. There, and there only, they were to bring what was once considered ill-gotten gains and offer their harvest as a gracious gift freely given, this sacred offering to the Divine. As this sacramental, this sacrificial, act was being conducted, the people were to say to the priest in a formal, communal, liturgical action, "Today, I declare to the Lord your

**God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.!" The priest will receive this offering on God's behalf, taking the basket of the fruitful toil of the ground, and place it before the Altar of the Lord. The response of the people shall then be "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor who went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and God brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." Then everyone, including the Levites and the aliens in their midst, strangers, foreigners, and other sojourners, who all together were allowed to reside among them, were all to celebrate the bounty of the land and from the soil, all given, blessed, by God to be joyfully received by every household. My, had the tables turned, oh how the Hebrews who had become the Israelites come a long way, baby! Now, as a settled agrarian culture, the Israelites had come full circle, or, in retrospect, is that actually just half?**

**In the Witness from the Gospels in Luke we read the tale of the temptations, not the famous and wonderful musical group. We read of Jesus' forty day sojourn in wilderness exile, his trials, travails, and tribulations, a reminder of another ancient wilderness journey, a long, protracted, trek through the desert by those liberated Hebrew seekers. It also serves as a reminder of our parallel forty-day Lenten exercise, remembering that the Sundays, like every Sunday, are always classified as mini-Easters in which we celebrate resurrection and thus are exempt, excluded from the official weekday and Saturday count making up the forty-day season in Lent. You know the**



story well. Jesus is tempted by the devil, the satanic figure who pops up out of nowhere on occasion to do “his” thing, cynically, sarcastically, terrorizing and tormenting. Whenever we read his shtick, it is almost as if he is God’s bizarre and strange bedfellow, God’s alter ego! The devil has three tricks up his proverbial sleeve in an effort to entice and trip up Jesus, causing him to take an alternative pathway than the one he perceived was the only and holy one God wanted for him to choose. The second one was to be given all glory and authority, the mythic figure of evil proportions showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Why in the world would Jesus agree to accept an offer to receive something, anything, that he already possessed, that was already his to enjoy. The third alluring intoxicant, as the devil precariously placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, was to implore the man from Nazareth to jump off from this steeple. “Throw yourself down from here” and the angels will swoop down in a divine technicolor intervention, creating the perfect cinematographer’s imaginative moment, the wildest show on earth, saving Jesus and making him the star of the show. What’s that about? Jesus declined the invitation!

The first temptation, cruelly placed before a very hungry man, a famished soul, who had not eaten for quite some time now, was to implore Jesus to turn rocks into bread, performing one of his many purported miracles still yet to come. The problem with this temptation is that interpreters tend to fixate on the immediate problem, the occasion rather than the issue, making the circumstances and situation all about the work product of some grain, food, and sustenance. This temptation had nothing to do with eating, the consumption of delicious and delectable morsels. Jesus responded with an answer about bread because the devil had raised a question about bread! Ask and answer! The subject matter or material in question could have been about any item, any idolatrous item, whatever in a fickle moment we might suddenly find alluring or

enjoyable, satisfying our temporary needs rather than looking at the big picture, examining thoroughly what really matters, the things that have eternal value. And is that not always our problem with our perceived wants and needs? We all like a shiny new object, and yes, that includes the obsession on a parcel of land, the lust for bigger and better barns, whatever those may be for us. Bread is child's play! This was not about bread! This was about how we choose to live our lives, the things that matter most, the things that are worthy of death, hills on which to die, transcendent, eternal, things. In America, we call these things the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. In our faith, it is the call to live a life worthy of our calling in Christ, to become the best we can be while striving to do the same for others as we follow Jesus, to "love wastefully" as Spong used to say. I do not need to insult your intelligence and tell you all that is wrong with Putin and with what Putin is doing, to his own country and people, to Ukraine, and to the rest of the world, yes, us included. It is obvious, a no brainer! What I will say is that, at the root of Putin's greed, his lusty thirst for power and to restore his nation to the nineteenth century Camelot days of the Soviet Union, now and long forever dead, is that he has no spirit, no soul, nothing within him that gives him perspective, the big picture, to have even an inkling of understanding of what is important, of what has both temporal and eternal value. He does not value life, human life that is the very *imago Dei*, the very image of the God who created each and every one of us, ironically including people with the potential to be despots, fascists, tyrants, and the like. As Spong also used to say, it is not about being a sinner, it is about the fact that some people are just less evolved than others. Sad, but so damn true! And when that happens in an individual, powermongers representing what Paul declared were part and parcel of "powers and principalities," innocent people, when they accidentally get in the way, die, collateral damage they are called, egregiously exterminated for a demonic cause, or at best they have their world rocked in unfortunate ways, their life's equilibrium shattered, permanently

**altered in the most derogatory of irreparable ways. Enough is enough! Sadly, we have learned empirically, experimentally, that even here in the safe confines of the land of the free and the home of the brave that our liberties, our democracy, is always threatened, always in peril, never to be taken for granted. We have painfully learned that it can all vanish before our very eyes, riotous and seditious treason even more than a distinct possibility here, of all places. Yes, we have all been shaken to the core, asking if nothing is safe, if nothing is sacred! We have poignantly discovered the answer to a most pivotal question we did not even know we needed to ask.**

**Yes, bread is a wonderful thing, an appetizer, or a part of any main course, a mainstay on our dining tables. It also serves, along with some wine, as an amazing, a wonderful, metaphor for communal living, developing and enhancing both civic and beloved faith community, even serving as a symbol of our faith! Why would Jesus ever turn down any of that good stuff? The answer is simple, because there is a time and a place for everything, as the preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us, a warning not to take the bait, to be sucked into the vortex of temptation's greedy hook, to settle for less, to settle at ours or anyone else's expense, diminishing us all in the process! Bread of life is only bread of life when it is bread of life! When it is not, it is not! Warning! Stay away! Beware! We walk by faith and not by sight! We follow the nudging of the still speaking Spirit, hoping and praying that we get it right at least some of the time if not most of the time. There but by the grace of God we go every day as we live and move and have our being! We pray for peace where there is none! We pray for rational minds to prevail when that mentality seems so sorely lacking, we pray for common sense, knowing that if sense were common everybody would have some. Quite simply, we pray! Sometimes that is all we can do, as helpless and hopeless as it all "feels," and we pray, praying that this very gift we offer in behalf of others, that in so doing we indeed are doing**

**enough! Ukraine sadly is out of our hands! Take nothing for granted in this life. Everything is fragile and can be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye! Yes, we matter as do all God's children, as does everything we do every day! Yes, we need a different kind of breeding!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is with us even now in the vortex of the worst evil perpetrated or imagined! Amen and amen!**