

# WHEN LESS IS MORE

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

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8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

*(First Sunday in Lent)*



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

### Deuteronomy 26:1-11

*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, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “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.”*

*<sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.*

### Romans 10:8b-13

*<sup>8</sup>But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup>because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.*

<sup>11</sup>The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

<sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup>For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

## **Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And 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. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

<sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ <sup>11</sup>and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Brian Bauknight is a United Methodist minister in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He retired recently after over 40 years in the ministry, 27 at the Christ United Methodist Church in Pittsburgh. He is a friend of mine and I heard him say recently that he went to college as a math major. He intended to go into business or finance. But after he graduated from college, he felt the call to ordained ministry and of course went on to seminary and had a career as a United Methodist minister. He said after

he had been in ministry for a long time, he got a letter from the college where he had graduated with the degree in math. It was from the dean of the math department, and they wanted to know what he had learned with his math degree during all those years. He said he thought a while about how it had helped him in understanding church budgets and in financial campaigns, but finally he said he just wrote back to them one sentence: "I have learned that I live better on 90 percent of my income than I do on 100 percent."

What a good answer. Whether it is from a mathematicians perspective or from spiritual discipline or just from living, sometimes less is more. Learning to give and to share and to live with discipline leads to a more joyful abundant life. The Lenten discipline of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving in some ways mean less time, less food, and less money. But it yields a richer, more joyful and balanced life.

Someone recently sent me a list of those church bulletin bloopers that you see from time to time. One said, "The Prayer and Fasting Conference will include meals." That pretty well says it. We want the benefits of prayer and fasting but without really doing it. If we can just talk about it at a conference, we don't really have to do it. But I am convinced that in today's busy, hectic world of activity after activity, less really can be more if we allow ourselves to simplify and slow down and refocus on priorities. That may be the best thing you could do for yourself this Lent.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus faces temptations that would give him much: stone into bread, all the kingdoms of the world, and a spectacular display to get a lot of attention. He decides less is more. The 40 days in the wilderness of prayer and fasting for Jesus became the basis for our 40 days of Lent. The pictorial imagery of the gospel is not about literal conversation with some cartoonish character in the desert. It is rather a deep inner struggle for Jesus about identity, integrity, and faithfulness. The same inner struggles that we all face, reflecting the same temptations we all face, for our lives to reflect authentic faithfulness to God or to make a deal for something else. It is the kind of things a fallen and broken Tiger Woods spoke about last Friday. It is interesting that though a Buddhist, he chose Lent as the time to confess his sins. Everyone here knows about the temptations that can com-

promise who you are as a person and what God wants you to be. Curiously, all of the quotes from Jesus in the gospel text come from the book of Deuteronomy. Paul too quotes Deuteronomy in the Romans letter.

Our first reading today is from the book of Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Law. It is the classic text about offering first fruits to God as a way of expressing our thanksgiving and gratitude. It is the Biblical way of saying that you can live better on 90 percent than on 100 percent. As the people offer the gifts to the priest, they are supposed to remember who they are by reciting their sacred history. The part that begins with “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” is apparently a creedal statement reciting the sacred history of the people of the Hebrews in relation to God’s activity in their lives. It includes references to knowing what it is to experience hardship and to live as aliens in a foreign land before coming into the land of promise, a land overflowing with milk and honey.

Perhaps the key sentence is, “Then you together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” The Levites were priests who owned no land, and aliens were what aliens are today. It is worth noting that those who had been wanderers and aliens in strange lands are commanded to include the wanderers and aliens in the bounty of the celebration. It is a statement that is at the heart of Biblical witness. Nothing is so central to our Biblical faith as showing hospitality to strangers. It is about peace and compassion rather than fear and arrogance. In the selfishness and savagery that often defines us, the Biblical witness is that there is another way to live. Jesus was at odds with both imperial authority and the religious establishment, as he included those that they left out. Jesus was ultimately crucified because he demanded that every authority is superseded by the love of God.

We often speak of the church as a parish. Curiously, the Greek word, the language of the New Testament, for parish is *paroikia* from which we also get the word parochial. *Paroikia* means a place of exile. And the word *paroikos* means stranger or resident alien. Our parishes, *paroikias*, are supposed to be places of hospitality for the *paroikias*, the strangers and aliens in our midst. I suspect that all of us at times

feel like aliens in a strange land. It is at the heart of our faith that David finds room for all people. It is our core identity as a Biblical people.

As we journey through this Lenten season, let's be clear that prayer and fasting and alms-giving are not just about personal piety, though that is important. But it is also about making us more sensitive to the ways of Christ and to what it means to be a people of God in the world in which we live. Prayer connects us with the heart of God. Fasting gives us the opportunity to be sensitive to the poor and hungry. Alms-giving, sharing of our bounty, offering first fruits, allows us to be clear about priorities and generosity. Prayer can allow us to be less busy and frantic, more focused and purposeful. Fasting can allow us to be less consumed with ourselves and less over-indulgent, which is easy to do in our society, and turn us toward more holy and healthy lifestyles. Alms-giving can make us less caught up in defining ourselves materialistically and more sensitive to a spirituality that calls us to live with hospitality to strangers and a generosity of resources. Less really can be so much more.

And as we think of temptations in this season, let's not trivialize what that might mean. Any temptation is finally about being something other than what God has called us to be as children of God. The temptation to turn stone into bread, accumulate worldly power, and wow people with the spectacular is finally a deep inner struggle for Jesus about identity, integrity, and faithfulness. For you and me, also, every decision is about identity, integrity and, faithfulness.

In this season, be sensitive to those places where less can be more. Less about material things, more about authentic spirituality, less about such a frantic pace in life, more about focus and quality, less about pride and self, more about humility and hospitality to strangers. In the mathematics of the ways of Christ, less really can be more.