

## Remembering

Today is the first Sunday in our season of Lent. This time is often spoken of in terms of our doing without—in terms of giving up something—in terms of fasting. Yet these actions are actually all about our response to the call to remember—to remember not just where this time of Lent will end, but to remember the pain and suffering which ends this journey; the cost of the journey for the one who made it for us—for you and me, true; but also for all who bear the image of God. There are many calls made to us from our scriptures—last Sunday as we observed the sacrament of Communion the call was “to do this in remembrance of me.” We were nourished spiritually through this sacrament which reminds us of Christ’s body shed for us; the new covenant sealed in Christ’s blood. The basis for this sacrament is found in the narrative found in the gospel accounts of the last days of Jesus’ life...that Jesus gathered with his loved ones just before his betrayal to celebrate the tradition by which his people remembered the saving actions of God early in their history and their formation as God’s chosen people—the celebration known as Passover. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning came from near the end of Deuteronomy, near the final portion of that retelling of the Exodus journey of God’s chosen people. There Moses was trying to prepare them for their life in the land they were about to enter. From reading this text it seem that Moses’ chief concern was about how these people would behave after entering this gift of land God was giving to them—that having once entered they might forget how they got there—that the reason that they received this gift was part of a covenant they had made. Moses calls upon the Israelites to celebrate their first harvest in the land “by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.” In this reading Moses actually provides a liturgy for them to use as they celebrate this event. This ritual is to be done every year. They are to bring before the Lord holing a basket filled with the yield from the harvest, give it to the priest and offer this liturgical recitation along with the filled basket. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor upon 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 he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” In this recitation, each year, the people were asked to basically remember all that God had done for them; to remember God’s care for them on the wilderness journey to the land and that the land, and thus the fruit which formed each harvest was a gift to them because God had chosen them; not because they had earned it. In performing this ritual the worshiping community identifies with their ancestors conspicuously not highlighting the power or glory attributed to them by tradition, but rather in the powerlessness—they were afflicted, their cry was heard, and they were brought out. More than anything else the ritual celebrates the faithfulness of God as it is manifest in the rescue of the powerless. Once the ritual is completed, they are told to go and celebrate as a community—a community celebration which included the Levites, who did not receive a portion of land, and the aliens residing among them who also owned no land to produce a harvest. The celebration of the Lord’s bounty was to

include all. They were also instructed that every third year a portion should be set aside to be given to those who were powerless within the community: the Levites, orphans and widow and those resident aliens. This was so that none within the community would be unable “to eat their fill.” When the verses 12-16 with which this text continues are added we can see within the instructions to these people an instructive picture for us as we aspire to be faithful people of God. We find instructions to recall—to remember that our redemption is rooted in God’s faithfulness to God’s word acting on our behalf—on behalf of the wandering Aramean, the oppressed and afflicted alien and the marginalized widow and orphan. We are to remember not to just celebrate the bounty of what we are given, but the faithfulness of our Lord who is the giver. We are to remember that we are also to be channels of God’s blessings to the vulnerable and the marginalized through our obedience to God’s desire that we consistently share that bounty with them. God not only acts on behalf of the powerless and blesses them with abundance, but God’s purpose is that they who have been redeemed might themselves act on behalf of the powerless in the same way that God has acted, blessing them with abundance. God continues to act to redeem but through the agency of the people of God when they choose to be faithful. In the Hebrew this passage reflects an interplay between the singular and the plural; between the actions of individuals and the actions of the whole community. The individuals are called to gather and participate in this new commitment of worship and shared life together—each individual is called to action, to worship, to gratitude and to the journey that is the shared life together as God’s people. This call to remember these things became a ritual the meaning of which was often forgotten or ignored. The ritual was to remind the people the Promised Land was not a reward for meritorious service; it was not a right or anything that the people could regard as naturally belong to them. It was to be viewed as an extraordinary, amazing gift; a source of delight and gratitude. The ritual was to be the thoughtful offering of God’s people of our first and our best to God as an acknowledgement that everything we have comes from God. These speeches by Moses made at the edge of the Promised Land calls the people to remember they have been redeemed by God. The later history of the people in the land narrates how they lost sight of the promises they had made, their promise to be God’s people and live according to the ways revealed to them while traveling in the desert. Throughout the story of Exodus and the history of these people, it is clear that trust in the God who claimed them was not something that they were often able to demonstrate. These failures they made, and the ones we make are often rooted in that same issue—a lack of trust when we face temptations to acts of disobedience to God’s ways. Our gospel lesson from Luke takes up this matter of temptations. Luke narrates that after his baptism in the Jordan, in addition to the proclamation from heaven as the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. He spends forty days there fasting where he was tempted by the devil. Luke says “he ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished.” Then Luke tells of three specific temptations which were placed before Jesus. The first Luke records is the one to turn stones into bread; the second is a promise that if he worships the devil, he will be given the power and glory of all the kingdoms of the world; and the third one is to prove his identity by throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple for God would then act to protect him. The devil begins two of these temptations with that little word “if”, if you are the Son of God, prove it to me. What is at stake here is not whether or not Jesus is God’s Son, that has already been

proclaimed; what is at stake is what that identity means. Underlying the dialogue between the devil and Jesus are two competing storylines. The devil offers a storyline of self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement and self-serving religious identity. Meanwhile Jesus responds with quotations drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures he knows so well that show awareness of the true source of life and identity. He knows life is more than food; he relies on God the one worthy of true worship and service; and his understanding that God's character is not to be tested. Jesus' responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self for life, glory and identity. These temptations are aimed at the heart of Jesus' identity—he has nothing to prove as he is declared to be the one to bring salvation to his people, not to use his power in any self-serving way. That would undermine his identity as the Son who trusts and relies on his Father. Both Jesus and the devil quote scripture, so it is not enough to know Scripture. Scripture must be read rightly in light of God's nature and the life God envisions for God's people. Such a life is rooted in God's narrative of deliverance and a response of faithful obedience to God rather than self-reliance which is the devil's storyline. These three temptations which are given in detail have to do with earthly power and glory. In each case Jesus' response is a quote from Deuteronomy where Moses urged the people to remember all God had done for them, how he tested them but always provided including manna to feed them asking that they worship only him. Israel was not always faithful and did not pass the testing in the wilderness, nor later when living in the Promised Land. Jesus, however, completed his forty days of testing and remained true to his vocation as God's Son. The Greek word in our text which is translated as temptations has more to do with testing than the things we usually associate with temptations. This means that the wording of 4:2 could read Jesus was tested by the devil; Jesus was tested concerning his baptismal vocation as the Son of God. He was obedient to the course upon which he had been set. Likewise, those who are his followers are tested concerning their baptismal vocation to be obedient and serve the Lord alone. Sometimes we have trouble being honest about this topic of temptations. Either we associate them with "sins" of self-indulgence, especially those that are titillating or we warn against temptation with prosaic terms filled with moralistic vim and vigor, but never reach the root of the issue. By pairing this text with that of the conclusion of the people's wilderness journey we are reminded that most of their issues had to do with a lack of trust...they were always remembering Egypt through rose-colored glasses and failing to trust in God's leading them to something better. This story of temptation although it narrates a story that portrays different concrete temptations or tests, it revolves around the one dynamic. The devil attempts again and again to sow mistrust. You may go hungry; you do know have enough; how do you know God is trustworthy? Often we are told to quote scripture in order to deal with life's challenges. Yet I wonder if it's not so much that Jesus quotes Scriptures to deflect temptation as it is that Jesus finds in Scripture the words to give voice to his trust. Because at the heart of each reply he makes is Jesus' absolute trust in—and dependence on—God for his identify and future. It seems there is a crucial link between trust and temptation. To the degree we trust God for our daily needs, for a sense of purpose, for our identity as God's child, the temptations offered by the world have little appeal. But to the degree that we allow our natural insecurity to lead us to mistrust God, we are open to the possibility, the appeal, and the temptation of the proposition that it is all up to us, that God is not able to provide and so we'd better take

matters into our own hands. Luke's temptation story is about how Jesus will fulfill his Spirit-anointed vocation as Son of God as proclaimed in his first "sermon" given from the Isaiah scroll. The problem with the people who entered the promise land was that despite their ritual to remember how God had redeemed them and provided for them, they never trusted that God would continue to be faithful...and so they weren't. We too are called to remember all that God has done, but to also trust that God is still active and working to redeem us all. There is also something else to remember: there is comfort in knowing that God remains faithful even if we fail. Remembering God's faithfulness and trusting in God's love as revealed in Christ is the answer to life's difficulties and testing. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.