A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Bread and Fruit*

Matthew 4

March 1, 2020

The First Sunday in Lent

We’re entering Lent with an intention to share communion each Sunday in this season. This is no small thing. Some of us grew up in churches where we had communion or eucharist or the Lord’s supper every Sunday, but a whole lot of us didn’t, me included. So, this is new.

Sometimes people who don’t take communion every Sunday worry about taking it too often. They worry that it will not be as special if they celebrate it regularly as it is when they celebrate only occasionally. Maybe they’re right. Maybe it’s not as special, kind of like anything you do all the time isn’t as special as things you save for special occasions. I’m not sure Jesus intended the Supper to be saved for special occasions, but I do think it’s supposed to be meaningful. I think we’re supposed to approach communion with reverence and humility befitting one remembering the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. And I think we’re to come joyfully and hopefully, too, as those who believe God is mysteriously and wonderfully present with us and to us in this gift as we come with our brothers and sisters to the Table of Grace.

As I’ve turned toward the Gospel texts for Lenten Sundays, I’ve been reading those texts with communion in mind and have been encouraged in my own spirit at the connections and meanings I’ve seen in the texts reading them through a Eucharistic lens and the meanings of the eucharist I’ve found in reading it through the texts.

As we consider the Gospel texts on these Sundays to come, I thought I would share some reflections on communion along the way. So, I’d like to do that this morning, listen to the Gospel text—the story of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness along with its twin—the temptation of the first humans in the Garden of Eden. And see what connections with communion emerge for us from these readings.

After his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. There he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward, he was famished just as anyone would be from a long time of fasting, or a long time of loneliness, or a long time of suffering. Jesus is the Son of God in whom God is well pleased, but he is also human. He has taken flesh and in doing so has taken on all the vulnerabilities and risks that come from being human. And even more than those. Because this human is also the Messiah.

What hangs in the balance in the wilderness is what kind of Messiah he will be. The three temptations he experiences each correspond to a way of being in the world. They each represent a path he can take. He can give the people what they want and be the Messiah of the masses’ adoration. That’s what the bread represents. He can wow the world with miracles and wonders and rule like a demi-god among mere mortals. That’s what the temple represents. He can build an army and rule as the new Caesar. That’s what the kingdoms represent. Bread for the masses, miracles from the height of the temple; ruling over rulers. He could have chosen any of those paths. Each would offer him the one thing that would remain with him until Gethsemane—a way to avoid suffering.

Jesus rejects them all. In the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry under the scorching sun until at Gethsemane at the end in the darkness of night, Jesus never turns to the easy way. He never turns away from the path demanded of him. He lowers himself to become human to become a servant, and embraces death, even death on a cross. In the epistle to the Romans, St. Paul paints the significance of Jesus’s death on the biggest cosmic canvas he can find. Because of the original sin of the first Adam death ruled over all creation, but now through the grace given by the death of the second Adam, Jesus, there is justification and life for all.

The path to this justification takes a decisive step forward in the spiritual battleground of the wilderness. The wilderness Jesus endured is the antithesis of the garden Adam and Eve enjoyed. Wilderness and Garden. We would be hard pressed to find two spaces more different from one another except that both were the scenes of temptations. In the Garden, Adam and Eve had every good thing they wanted. In the wilderness, Jesus didn’t even have the basics he needed. Adam and Eve were surrounded by flowering witness to God’s bountiful goodness. Jesus was in a desert on the outer rim of the known world. Adam and Eve had one another for companionship and God for walks in the cool of the evening. Jesus was alone.

What happens in the wilderness though mirrors what happened in the Garden of Eden. The two stories are connected. The Deceiver shows up, hissing temptations at his would-be victims. To Eve and Adam and later to Jesus the tempter first uses food as temptation. With Jesus, food is just the first of three temptations, each of which Jesus rejected. With Adam and Eve, he needn’t bother with the others. The food thing was enough. “Here’s some food you should eat.” “But I love God and God said not to eat that food.” “Look, pretty food.” “OK”. That’s pretty much how it went. Satan knew his audience. Humans are vulnerable to our appetites—for food, and for anything else we think we must have right now.

“If you eat from that tree, you won’t die. Your eyes will be opened. You will be like God.”

When Eve looked back at the tree, her eyes saw something different than what she’d seen before. The tree hadn’t changed. She’d changed. The snake is right, she thought, not pausing to consider the danger of doing anything a snake tells you to do.

Well, would you look at that! The fruit of that tree is good for food, it is a delight to the eyes, it is to be desired to make one wise. And she was hooked. The fruit is not really the point. The fruit is just what Satan used. The point is that God said no, not that one, but she, both of them, said yes, exactly that one. God said “Know your limits” but they said, “We want to be like God.” God said, “Listen to me” but they said, “This serpent knows better. We know better.” And they ate the forbidden fruit.

With Jesus, the bread temptation isn’t exactly about bread either. Well, it is about bread—he is hungry. Those stones scattered around the ground, do look like tasty loaves if you’re hungry enough. But it’s not about bread. Satan uses bread to convince Jesus to use his powers to make things work for him. If you can turn stones to bread you don’t need grain to grow or rain to fall or soil for the grain to grow in. You don’t need the earth to flourish, and you don’t need human hands or human involvement and you don’t need to be hungry any more. Just make everything work for you without suffering anymore. “Humans do not live by bread alone,” Jesus replies. And in doing so, rebuffs not only the temptation to ease his hunger, but turns away from the temptation to be the kind of Messiah who promises everyone: if you follow me, you’ll never suffer again.

Bread and fruit are center stage in the two tentpole temptation stories in scripture. Bread and fruit. What a wonder that Jesus not only redeems us through his death, but before his death, on the night of his betrayal, he turns back to these two agents of misery and temptation and redeems them, too. He takes a loaf of bread, just the kind that once tempted him, and he breaks it. And he redeems it: this is my body. He takes the cup with the juice of the fruit, just like the juice that ran down the chins of the first people. And he redeems it: this is my blood. Now you eat this and drink this in remembrance of me. As you do, remember everything: Remember your sins. Remember God’s grace. Remember my suffering. Remember your faith. Remember the stories of evil. Remember the goodness of God who overcomes evil for good.

I love this connection with communion. As we come to the table, on this first Sunday in Lent, this connection stands before us with great power. We know bread and wine were common elements on dining tables in Jesus’ day. At that table that night, he reaches for the most basic food and drink to represent himself. We know that. We can also see how he was drawing together two stories of cosmic spiritual battle—the temptation of humanity in the Garden and the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. In one hand, he takes humanity’s great failure. In the other hand, he takes his own faithfulness. He breaks one and pours out the other. Humanity’s failure and Christ’s faithfulness meet in him whose body will be broken and whose blood will be shed. They meet here in us when we take the bread and juice in our own bodies and becomes part of His body.

As we receive the broken bread and the crushed fruit, let us always remember. Every time. Everything. Let it be Christ in the palm of your hand. Remember him. With a thanks be to God and a full heart, with the remembrance that God is good and you are loved like this, and with an Amen, receive the sacrament of our salvation.

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