

“From security to generosity”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13 (March 6, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, that period of 40 days leading up to the celebration of Easter. It’s a time for us to consider the journey that Jesus took on his way to the cross.

And to think about our own journey of discipleship and what it means to be faithful.

Our gospel reading tells the story of Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, and the temptations he faced. We’ll get to that soon.



But first I want to ask you – when’s the last time you gave something away? What was it?

For me, it was a rocking chair, given to my daughter and son-in-law. They’re expecting their first child – our first grand-child. These soon-to-be parents have been busy preparing for the baby’s arrival. One thing they didn’t have was a rocking chair. How would they feed the baby, and rock it to sleep?

We had a rocking chair – the very one that Lindsay and I had used when our children were small. It’s a family heirloom, going back several generations. It seemed to me a good time to pass it on. I’ll miss it. It’s pretty comfortable, actually. And I’m a hoarder who hates getting rid of anything! But I know they’ll put it to good use. It wasn’t hard to give it away.

Not like some things.



Well, let’s move to our Old Testament passage from the book of Deuteronomy. It’s a story about harvest. And you might well wonder what it has to do with *Lent*.

This passage gives instructions for what people should do when they come into the promised land. They’re told to take the first fruits of the harvest – the very first the land produces – put it in a basket, take it to the place where they meet with God, set it before the altar of the Lord. These “first fruits” belong to God.



We think of Lent as a time to give things up. And this passage points to a very significant giving up. One that I would find rather difficult.

Imagine yourself in the place of those Israelites. You've been wandering in the desert 40 years. You've just come into the land. You've settled on your homestead, tilled the soil, sown the seed.

Then you waited. And wondered. Would it take? Would the rains come? Would the soil produce? Would the plants grow? Would there be a harvest? This story may remind us of our own ancestors who arrived here on the prairies, and somehow managed to eke out a living those first few tentative years.

So finally you have those first fruits, and what do you do with them? Remember, this is the first time you've planted anything on this land. You don't know what will come, if the rest of the harvest will succeed. This first little bit could be the difference between life and death. But Moses tells the people to give it up.



Have any of you been gardeners? Have you grown your own tomatoes? Have you carefully chosen the variety, nurtured them from seed, set them out after the risk of frost had passed?

Have you watered and fertilized? Have you waited patiently for them to ripen in the sun? Have you picked that very first one when it was red and ripe and juicy? There's nothing better, I say, than a fresh tomato from the garden!

But now you're supposed to give it away? Yes, the whole basket of them. They're not for your enjoyment. They are, says Moses, for the *Lord*. Bring them to church. Place them here, at the front of the sanctuary. It goes against our natural inclinations. We hold on to those first fruits of harvest. It's only later, when we have a surplus, that we start giving things away.

And it's not those precious tomatoes, either. It's more likely the zucchini, at the end of the season. It's said that's the only time when church folk lock their cars in the parking lot. To prevent someone from sticking a basket of zucchini in the back seat before they go home!

You see, our tendency is to give out of *surplus* rather than scarcity. To give when we're feeling secure, after all our needs have been met. But to give out of *scarcity*, trusting that our needs will be met ... that is a far riskier proposition! And I don't know about you, but I am quite risk-averse. It doesn't come easily.



Here's something that can help. As people make their sacrifice, they're asked to tell their story. I mean their *faith* story.

"You shall make a response before the LORD your God," says Moses. "A wandering Aramean was my father," referring to Abraham ...

And, well, here's the "Cole's Notes" version: They went down to Egypt, grew in number, were treated badly, cried out to God who heard their prayer, were led by God out of Egypt with signs and wonders, and brought to this good land.

And why is it so important to say those things? It's important because it sets our *present* circumstance in a larger context. It shifts our attention: from us to God. This is what *God* has done!

And it's only by remembering these things that we can summon the strength to be faithful. To be risk-takers. To step out and go places. To take our precious first fruits and give them away, trusting that the God who has brought us this far will not let us die.

It's all about learning to trust in God's love, knowing that whatever happens, it will be alright.



All of which begs the question: Where does your security come from?



Is it from the things you have? From your possessions, your bank account, your RRSP's? From the place you live, the community you're part of? From the things you've done, the provisions you've made? The health you enjoy?

To be fair – these things *do* matter. I'm not suggesting they're of no importance. Because clearly they are. We are so fortunate to live in this part of the world, to be blessed with such a high standard of living, food and shelter, health care, education, friends, a community of faith.

But doesn't our security, ultimately, rest on something deeper? Things around us can be shaken. Communities change. The economy fluctuates. In uncertain times those things we look to may not give us the same sense of certainty or permanence they once offered.

So when you bring your first fruits, says Moses to the people, tell your story! Remember where you've come from. Remember to trust in God. God is the ultimate source of all we have, and all we are. Our security rests not in these external things, but in the enduring goodness of God.



Now let's talk about Jesus' temptation. What did Satan offer him? A loaf of bread. The glory of all earth's kingdoms. And the angels of God to keep him safe. That *third*

temptation may have been the most difficult one of all, because it quotes scripture – some beautiful words from Psalm 92.

That old devil’s a wily fellow! He’s noticed that Jesus is fond of quoting scripture. So he turns it back on him.

“God will look after you! The angels will protect you! Why not just throw yourself off the pinnacle. If that’s what you believe ...”

Jesus already knows that his life rests in the hands of his heavenly Father. He has come from God, and will return to God. And what he offers to the world is God’s eternal life. Is that not where our security lies?



Here’s what I’m trying to say this morning: The life and love of God are what sustain us – through good and bad, ups and downs, through plenty and poverty, health and sickness and, yes, even death itself! We’ll see that clearly when we get to the resurrection.

But now, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as Satan launches his first volley and tries to knock Jesus off his course, this is what holds him true (Jesus I mean) and sends the tempter on his way. It is God alone who stands at the centre of Jesus’ life and ministry. *God*. Could this God be at the centre of our life and ministry too?



Our theme today is “From security to generosity,” and I think those two are quite closely related.

With God at the centre of our lives we are free to take some risks. When we know that our lives are ultimately secure, then we’re not so fearful about giving stuff away. Whether it’s a rocking chair, or something far more significant. For goodness sake, Jesus will lay down his very *life*, trusting that the power of God’s love will raise him up again.



The Danish theologian and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, critiqued the church of his day: He pictured a great treasure that was out in the middle of a frozen pond, where the ice was thin and dangerous. But the church, he claimed, was spending all it’s time skating around the edge, afraid to go to the centre, when it might be risky to do so.

Instead it skated round and round where the ice was thick. It even managed to make it appear rather pretty, with impressive figures and fancy movements. Yes, it was a lovely thing to

behold – but it was not where the church was called to be. Perhaps it's not *only* me who likes to play it safe!



Today we begin our journey toward the cross. Looking forward, we know what Jesus gave away, what he endured, the risks he took, the treasure he offered, the life he lived. It was not a particularly *safe* life. But it was, absolutely, beautiful.

Faith is *always* like that – risky and beautiful. It was for Abraham, who set out (at a certain age, it should be noted) on a journey to who knows where. Or Moses, when he demanded freedom from the great Egyptian Pharaoh. Or the whole people of Israel, when then they set their feet on the still-wet surface of the Red Sea and set out gingerly to cross it. Some voices said they should go back.

And it was the same, more or less, when those first fishers-turned-disciples left their nets on the beach. And maybe it wasn't all that different when you decided to be baptized. Or volunteered to serve. Or speak about your faith. Or sponsor a refugee family – who knows how that might go?



Trusting the One who holds our lives, can give us courage to loosen our grip on things that maybe we shouldn't be grasping quite so tightly. This is one of the invitations of Lent: To let go of *some* things, while giving ourselves more fully to *others*.

How might we be generous in this Lenten season? For starters, there are lots of Ukrainians who are going to need help from someone. And because of MCC's involvement in the region, we are well-placed to do it.

Generosity may involve our finances. But it may also involve our time and talent. Time to give when others need your presence. Talent when you have a particular gift to share. We can be generous with our love, not restricting it to a few but offering it to many. We can be generous with forgiveness, even when it's hard to do so. Generous with patience, generous with kindness.



In your bulletin you'll find a question for reflection when you go home this morning, and through the week. It has to do with holding on, and letting go. What are you holding onto tightly that can now be released? And the extension to that question: What can you be generous with in the days that lie ahead.

The Good News is that whatever happens, we are held secure in the strong arms of a loving God, who will never let us go. Amen.