

Who Could Resist?

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2; 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

Preached at Trinity Cathedral

First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019

Who could resist? The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, facing exhaustion, starvation, dehydration, plagues, and enemy attacks. Before that, it was 400 years of slavery and oppression, brutal forced labor and infanticide at the hands of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Who could resist, then, the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, of land to claim and cultivate as a free people, of walls and boundaries and security and peace? An entire generation had died out trying to obtain this promise, coming so close but left grasping at unfulfilled hope and dreams deferred. Now, a new generation of Israelites stands poised to finally, finally claim their inheritance, for just over those final mountains and across a river lies the promise land. Hope has been kept alive, fueled by witnessed miracles both small and great: the manna that daily fell from heaven, the rock that poured living water, the serpent raised up high on a staff to cure the plague, the parting of an entire sea. But today, that hope becomes a reality they will taste and see and claim and own. But before they do, God, speaking through Moses, gives some final instructions on how they are to live in this new place. “When you settle in the land and claim your inheritance, bring some of your very first harvest to God as a thank offering, remember all that you have been through, then gather everyone including the strangers among you and celebrate all that God has done.” With these words ringing in their ears, the Israelites set off for all that awaits. But will they remember? The promise land is there – right there – and who could resist?

In 1606, the London Company was founded through a royal charter to establish colonial settlements in North America. In addition to assigning land rights to colonists and calling for the propagation of the Christian religion among the so called “infidels and savages,” settlers were

commanded to present 20% of their profits to the king and required to observe a day of thanksgiving to God upon arriving in the New World. So when these first groups of colonizers arrived in Virginia after a long, harrowing journey through the Atlantic's watery wilderness, they knelt down on the shore and celebrated the first American Thanksgiving. And true to the charter, they presented their first fruits to the King – not the gold and silver originally anticipated, but tobacco leaves and timber. This became the pattern for future colonists: give thanks, give the first fruits to the financiers, and sometimes, like the Pilgrims, invite the strangers. But there was so much land for the taking, and the forests had to be cleared for the Empire's insatiable appetite, and the strangers had to be removed to ensure security. Who could resist?

Jesus has been wandering in the wilderness 40 days – part of the same wilderness the Israelites had wandered for 40 years. He has not eaten and at the end of this journey he is famished. Seeing his opening, the tempter presents Jesus with three irresistible possibilities: food, power, and safety. Make food in this desolate wilderness out of stones and provide for yourself. All the lands of the earth are yours, along with their wealth and authority, if only you genuflect to me, your benefactor. Throw yourself from the top of this pinnacle, claim your security in this vulnerable position. Food, power, and safety. These three things every people wants, and no one can resist. For who among us can resist the promise of abundant resources – more fresh produce in our grocery stores than can be consumed; picture perfect houses with shiny, new appliances and enviable gardens; performant schools with cutting edge programs for our children; state of the art medicine for ailing loved ones. Who among us right here, today, can resist the promise of power and authority – that higher position in the company that comes with increased pay and stock options, the committee membership that encourages networking opportunities, the degree that makes one an expert, the benefactor's wealth that can bend any ear.

Who among us here today, in these very pews, under this roof, who among *us* can resist the promise of security – the peace and quiet of the suburban neighborhood, the freedom to travel anywhere, the comfort of our retirement nest egg, the assurance that what we built will last.

Ah, but this promised peace, power, and prosperity comes with a price. In the world in which we live, this wilderness where the tempter roams, what we are offered requires the suffering, oppression, and marginalization of another in exchange for our obedience and silence. If you want the best food, certain people will be exploited for their cheap labor. If you want the house in that neighborhood with the best schools, certain people must be kept out of those neighborhoods and the funding at other schools eliminated. If you want that promotion you will need to keep quiet about the sexual harassment. If you want a successful career, then you must neglect your spouse and children. If you want that nest egg, then you must accept dehumanizing working conditions. If you want security, we must have prisons. If you want peace, we must have war. We may not be sending our 20% to the King of England, but we certainly still tithe our offering as obedience to the status quo. It seems impossible to imagine another way. It seems impossible to resist.

In the wilderness of Luke's Gospel, however, something remarkable transpires. Jesus resists. Offered the possibilities that all people before and since have found irresistible, Jesus simply says, "No." The food and resources you dangle before me do not give me life. The benefactors who offer power and authority are not God, so my knee shall not bow. I am not outside of God's security even in this most precarious position. Jesus resists where we cannot.

This is the message of Lent – it's not giving up chocolate that brings me closer to God, rather it's that I must be reoriented to see the truth about the world around me. I have been told it's this job, or this neighborhood, or this technology that will provide what I need. As a Lenten

people we respond: Only Jesus is the bread of life. I have been told that it's wealth, or social status, or education, or body type that is worthy of admiration. As a Lenten people we respond: Only Jesus is Lord. I have been told that I am only safe thanks to weaponry, punishment, and walls. As a Lenten people we respond: Only Jesus is my refuge. In this recalibration I can see new possibilities – a different promised land, our new inheritance, known as the Kingdom of God. A place that is not about hoarding resources for my people, but about opening up the storehouses to the poor, the sick, the widow, and the orphan. A place that is not about claiming authority through power, but about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly in opposition to the powers that be. A kingdom that is not about building walls or warring for peace but about risking vulnerability by visiting the prisoner, welcoming the foreigner, and setting the captive free. In his resistance, Jesus inaugurates this new kingdom so very different from the world we have inherited. He is our new inheritance; may we not resist. Amen.