

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010

Text: Luke 4:1-13

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

If you are going to give up something for Lent, let me suggest giving up one or more of the *bad judgments* we are in the habit of making. Today and for the next four Sundays I'm going to talk about some typical bad judgments people make, which show up in the Gospel readings. For example, that we can run away from our problems; that we are better than other people; that we can write people off; that we can spin the truth.

The bad judgment I want to talk about today is the notion that we can manage just fine without God in our lives. Unlike the example of Jesus in today's Gospel, we act as if we *can* live "by bread alone."

When we talk about bad judgments, most of the time we are referring to bad miscalculations. For example, the time I thought I could pass a gasoline tanker on a two-lane highway in an underpowered diesel truck with twenty young men riding in the back of the truck. That was dumb, and it almost cost us our lives.

But the bad judgment I'm talking about today is much worse, although not so dramatic. It's just forgetting. Forgetting God, that is.

The story of the Bible is the history of people rebelling against God, and God working to get us back. But rebellion sounds like hard work. Most of the time, the rebellion consisted of simply forgetting. Psalm 106:21: "They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt." And forgetting is so easy and so common that it's a shock to realize that **forgetting is how we break the first and greatest commandment!**

"Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, 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."

Then, at his nadir, his memory was tested. Could he remember that only weeks before, at the Jordan River, a voice from heaven had said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

In Jesus' situation, most of us would waste no time making stones into bread. We would make ourselves sick eating fresh bread, with no spiritual thoughts of any sort. And if we were then offered even the lordship of a very small Caribbean island, we would ask where to sign. The devil would not have needed a third temptation. We would be his people. Our memory—of God's law, God's love, and God's promises—is not that good.

And it's not only trouble that affects our memory. When things go smoothly in our lives, it's very easy to take credit ourselves, or share it with our favorite people, and to forget that all our gifts come from above. In our pride, we imagine that our life, our well-being, our good fortune,

our blessedness, are all up to us. We think we can do pretty well on our own. As Hosea 13:6 says, “When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me.”

But how do you believe in God when absolutely everything is going wrong, as it was for Jesus at that point? He had to wonder whether he had been hallucinating back at the Jordan. God was pleased with him? Really? So pleased that he sent him into the wilderness without food? You and I might not have spent a literal forty days in a literal desert literally starving, but when calamity has struck us, our first thought was not that God is great and merciful.

But that is the point of this story—to let us see what true faith in God looks like. Jesus exemplifies faith that survives the greatest possible difficulties. What he believes about God totally contradicts what he is experiencing. Yet in spite of everything, he remembers his heavenly Father. He demonstrates what God commands us to do: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. Fear God more than you fear death; love God more than you love life. Later, when Jesus told his disciples to love God more than life itself, he was not asking them to do something he had not done himself.

But who can do that?

Well, there was Job. The Book of Job is about someone who was tested as Jesus was, but did not forget God. For me, the climax of the book comes in chapter 2, when Job’s wife tells him to be reasonable. When his suffering has taken away everything he has, and he is now afflicted in his flesh, she tells him to do what makes sense: “Curse God, and die!” But even in his confusion, Job counters with faith: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad? In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” He did not allow himself to be tricked by appearances into forgetting the faithfulness of God. That’s enough to make you wonder if he was a real person!

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—Psalm 103:2.

Truly. We should.

But what are we supposed to do? Listen to the story of Jesus scoring 100% on the ultimate test of faith, and then go and do likewise? I’m used to thinking of faith as something less extreme than that. More nominal. I pay God occasional homage, sometimes I pray to him. I try to keep him in the loop. How could I ever hope to keep the first commandment the way Jesus kept it, when he was tested by the devil?

The bad news in this story is that we still need the lesson God taught his people in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 8:3 tells us: “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” We forget that we cannot *live*, not in the full sense of the word “live,” by

bread alone—or even bread plus lots of other good things. Things don't give us life. Satisfaction of our appetites and desires does not constitute life. God, by his word, gives us life. We forget that.

The good news in this story, however, is what Jesus is hinting at when he says we do not live by bread alone. We are supposed to know the rest of the line from Deuteronomy, even though it's not in Luke's version of this story: We *do* live, we *will* live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

It is this life-giving character of God's word that draws our attention and holds it, and helps us remember it. This is not something we must memorize in order to be technically correct before God. This is a word which gives us life. In all the contexts in which we struggle—contexts which are represented symbolically by the three temptations of Jesus—we are assured by Jesus, in a promise that is sealed by his death and resurrection, that God will save his people.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits: forgiveness, life, salvation, community, peace, joy, etc. Don't forget. Don't let it slip your mind. Amen.

