

God Is Faithful, Can We Be? – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Once upon a time, there was a family of four who lived in a small town in the Midwest. There was a mom, a dad, a teenage daughter, and a slighter younger teenage son. One February, a day and a half after the season of Lent began, the family could not find the son anywhere. They called for him, and they searched for him. The mother and father knocked on the neighbors' doors asking if their son might be at their neighbors' homes. The daughter knocked on the same neighbors' doors asking if anyone had seen her brother. They couldn't find him anywhere. No one had seen him. They were incredibly worried for the son was a great gift in all their lives. They assumed he must have been kidnapped and dragged off into the hilly ravines behind their home and beaten senseless, never to be a part of their family again. Then just as they had lost nearly all hope, the mother decided to look upstairs. There in his room they discovered the lost son, unconscious of their desperate searching for him throughout the land. There was great rejoicing that their lost son had been found. But why hadn't he heard their cries or known of their anguish over his absence? It seems the teenage son was sound asleep, passed out, suffering from the devastating effects of giving up coffee for Lent.

Welcome to Lent 2013 in America, our wilderness.

On Wednesday as Lent began and we celebrated Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we are dust, and to dust we will return. The Lenten season is only four days old now. That means we have 36 more days in the wilderness, not counting Sundays, to dwell on our sinfulness and to torture ourselves into submission—36 more days without soda or electronics or Facebook or homework or coffee (Ransom, are you awake?) or whatever you may have vowed to deny yourself this Lenten season. We are in the wilderness, and our Scripture passages for today remind us of that.

Deuteronomy 26 takes us into the wilderness to join the Israelites at the climax of their exodus story. Moses is nearing the end of the sermon he has been preaching for much of the book of Deuteronomy, and nearing the end of his life, and the Israelites have neared the end of their 40 years of wandering. They stand on the high plains of Moab looking down at the fertile Jordan River Valley that awaits them below, the "land flowing with milk and honey" that they and their ancestors have been trying to reach for the last 40 years. It is a beautiful sight. And what does Moses tell them? He continues to try to teach them. Our daughter Mathea might say he enters his "lecture" mode. Moses gives them instructions for how to conduct a thanksgiving service at the time of their first harvest. He won't be there, so he tells them the proper way to celebrate God's faithfulness to them. Once they have "possessed" the land and "settled in it," they should bring some of their first harvest and return it to the Lord. Rather than celebrating the bounty of the harvest, the liturgical ritual outlined in this passage focuses on the history of the Israelites

and God's faithfulness to them throughout it. In their bounty, they must not forget their history. When they take their harvest offering to the priest in office, they are to recount the story of their ancestor, the "wandering Aramean" Jacob, who "went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien." This recitation of Israel's history should sound very familiar to us. It reminds us of the story that we know well of God's faithfulness to Israel through their suffering and deliverance, but it also sounds similar to the history of God's faithfulness to us that we recount each week as we recite together the Apostles Creed, an outline of our Christian history. Have you noticed our youngest voices filling in some of the pauses as we say the creed together? Even though they're really young and they don't know all the story yet, the creed is already becoming the history of our toddlers just as it is the history of those of us who have been in the church for decades, and we celebrate the story of God's faithfulness to us as we say it together each week and as we move through the story of our history each year with the liturgical calendar. (The children learn about the liturgical calendar every fall in a Godly Play lesson called "How the Church Tells Time.")

Psalm 91 continues in this celebration of God's faithfulness to us at all times and in all places. It overflows with divine, extravagant, beautiful promises of God's faithfulness throughout all our wilderness wanderings. The last three sentences of the Psalm switch from third-person to first-person perspective. Those three sentences contain ten first-person pronouns. As someone who notices words, I think that switch is worth our attention. The Psalmist himself first reports that God will faithfully protect us, but then he gives God a voice so that the Lord personally affirms these promises to the people. This switch in perspective adds credibility to the psalmist's claims.

If we read Psalm 91 literally, we could walk out of church and into a lion's cage with confidence that God would protect us. Jews and Christians have copied passages from this Psalm and worn it on their bodies in amulets to magically ward off danger. It has been used to argue that guardian angels protect us from harm. The psalmist doesn't exaggerate in affirming that God is able to protect us in any place, any time, and any circumstance, but the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness presented in the Gospels rejects the use of Scripture in the literal way that some might interpret this Psalm. Psalm 91 shows up in both Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Christ's temptation story. In our Gospel lesson from Luke today, the devil quotes Psalm 91 in his third test in order to tempt Jesus to jump off the top of the temple, but Jesus refuses to claim God's promise of protection for his own benefit. Jesus says that to do so would be to test rather than to trust in God's faithfulness. So rather than use Psalm 91 as a magical guarantee to whip out when we want to do something risky or when life is difficult, this Psalm is a reminder that God is faithful and that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God." At the end of Lent, we will see Jesus claim the promise of another psalm as he hangs on the cross, but then he will use it to exalt God rather than himself as Satan demands of him here in the wilderness.

In addition to helping define who Jesus would be throughout his ministry, Luke's account of the temptation reinforces the ongoing story of God's faithfulness. Luke explains that Jesus was "led

by the Spirit in the wilderness.” The Spirit didn’t just drop Jesus off and leave him—the Spirit was with Jesus as the devil tempted him to use God’s power to quench his hunger and to satisfy his desires for power. While Jesus wasn’t willing to accept the devil’s use of Scripture to twist him into testing God, the story of Israel as told in the book of Deuteronomy clearly serves as a backdrop for Jesus’ temptation experience in the wilderness. Some would argue that Jesus’ three temptations correspond to three tests that Israel faced. Besides the obvious parallels to the story of the Israelites being tested in the wilderness for 40 years, it’s important to note that each time Jesus responds to one of the devil’s temptations, he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy. He draws upon the story he has inherited, that he knows well, and he takes up his part in that same story just as Scripture foretold. Jesus, because he is the Son of God, proves to be faithful in ways that Israel wasn’t.

Even Rome in Paul’s day probably didn’t look a lot like the wilderness, but in the passages leading up to our epistle lesson for today, Paul sounds as if he is struggling in the wilderness as he tries to explain why non-Jews are following Jesus but Jews are rejecting Christ. Like the psalmist and Luke, Paul draws on his familiarity with the Old Testament as he argues that God’s faithfulness and offer of salvation extend to all, both Jew and Gentile.

It is wonderful to know that we can trust in God’s faithfulness as we go through the wilderness and all of life, but most of us aren’t passive creatures. Our Scripture today reminds us that God is faithful, but as I look further, I see that these passages also suggest something about how we should respond to God’s faithfulness. While God’s faithfulness doesn’t depend on our faithfulness, God still asks us to be faithful in return. In the midst of all his superlative poetic language, the psalmist still reminds the people that it is when they call out to God, that God answers them. Paul gives the church in Rome the same message—they must “call on the name of the Lord” in order to be saved. Jesus refuses to call on God in the ways that the devil urges him to do, but his response to God’s faithfulness is nonetheless active rather than passive. Jesus makes active choices to resist each of the devil’s temptations.

When the Israelites were about to “settle” the land God was giving them to “possess,” Moses instructed them in how they needed to be faithful to God by using the land well and celebrating God’s gift of bounty by sharing it with the Levites, and even with the “aliens” who lived among them. They needed to remember their history. The creed that Moses gave them that they would recite every year as they took their harvest offering to the temple reminded them that Jacob was an alien in Egypt, and that they and their ancestors had spent the last 40 years as aliens. As aliens themselves, they should understand the needs of the aliens among them. Their wilderness story should lead them to inclusion rather than exclusion, yet both the ancient history of Israel and the history of Israel as a 20th-century nation-state point to the difficulty of both taking possession of the land and being hospitable to the stranger and alien.

Commentators call our Old Testament lesson for today some of the best-known verses in Deuteronomy; for some in the Jewish community, they are richly important. They are used by some Jews to help substantiate their claim to the land of Israel. But what does it mean to be

given a land to “possess” as the Deuteronomy passage states? According to Old Testament scholar Eugene March, this passage makes clear that the land God gave Israel to “possess” still belonged to God. The Israelites were instructed by Moses to “possess” and “settle” it as the first verse states not because they had complete claim to it, but because God gave it to them to “possess.” March explains that the verb “possess” is used over thirty times in the first eleven chapters of Deuteronomy. In acknowledgement that the land still belonged to God, Moses instructed them to give back to God the “first of all the fruit of the ground” each year at harvest time. According to March, “this was a sacrifice indicating that the God of Israel was the true owner of the land.”

I’m not an Old Testament or Hebrew scholar, and I don’t play either on television, but March’s explanation seems plausible to me in the 21st century. We are incredibly rich in comparison to most of the world. We have to give things up for Lent in order to hear our stomachs growl or hear the quiet of silence or see the various colors of our dog’s eyes or enjoy the pleasure of an afternoon nap. Isn’t it probable that God wants us to “possess” the land and the riches we have been given in ways that benefit the aliens among us? Doesn’t it seem consistent with God’s character in Christ Jesus that we should be doing things that draw the outsiders in rather than building barriers along our borders to keep them out?

For us today the story of Jesus’ temptation can seem quite bizarre. We’re not accustomed to people being transported from place to place or having the devil literally appear in front of us. We don’t even always know when we’re being tempted. We have so many choices, sometimes it seems that we have to choose between bad and worse or good and better, and many of our choices are even more complex than that. The clearly bad and good choices are the easy ones that we have to make. It’s all the variables of our intricate world that challenge us most in our call to respond to God faithfully. When should the good of the body outweigh the needs of an individual? Which should we give greater value as we make our choices—the lives of Israelis or the lives of Palestinians? the lives of Native Americans or illegal immigrants or programs for the education of our children? care for an unborn fetus or the future of a young woman living in poverty? the needs of the unemployed or care for the environment? Where are the guiding words of Scripture for questions like these?

In his discussion of Luke published in the New Interpreter’s Bible, Alan Culpepper, Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, argues that the temptation story doesn’t offer ethical instructions for every situation we will encounter in life, but that it does give us insight into many of the types of ethical dilemmas we face. In this fairly long quote from Culpepper, he says that “faced with pressing decisions regarding his identity and vocation, Jesus allowed himself to be led by the Spirit. In the experience of wrestling with the temptations, Jesus responded to the Scripture’s admonitions regarding God’s purpose for life and the call to worship and serve God. In the specific situations that would follow he would have to work out the shape of his obedience to these admonitions. Christian ethics does not come prepackaged. The call is not to adherence to a list of rules and regulations but to faithfulness to the call and purposes of God.”

God has and always will be faithful to us. How will we be faithful to God? The Free Methodist Church of North America has designated today as Freedom Sunday. We have learned in recent years that choices that seem simple like what kind of shirt we wear and what kind of chocolate we eat affect the lives of innocent people on the other side of the world. One way that we can be faithful to the call of God today is by listening to the voices of Christians who are being led by God's Spirit to labor on behalf of these aliens in our world. We can enter into discussions as a church that help us figure out how to respond faithfully to the call God has for us individually, for St. Paul's, and for the church of the world. For the 40 days of Lent 2013, we can try to follow the ways of Jesus in the wilderness as he was led by the Spirit.

Our Scripture passages today are all telling one story. We see that in the interconnectedness that they have with one another. We cannot separate the Israelites looking down on the Jordan River Valley from the new Christians in Rome any more than we can separate ourselves from the Israelites and from one another. Just as these Scriptures are woven together across time and space, the lives of the Israelites reach forward to Christ and to Paul and to us and we reach back to them. We are all the church. Just as God was faithful to the Israelites, the Psalmist, Jesus, and Paul and the Christians in Rome, God is faithful to us. Just as God is faithful to us, God asks us to be faithful as well. God calls us to be faithful when we are stuck in the wilderness, and God calls us to be faithful to the alien.