Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13 Luke 4:1-13

At the services on Ash Wednesday, we were invited to keep a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. These activities are meant to remind us of who we are, and whose we are. They are meant to move us beyond self-reliance, self-centeredness, self-fulfillment, and into a fuller awareness that we are part and parcel of God’s creation: made in the image and likeness of God, redeemed and filled with God’s grace and heavenly benediction, members of the body of Christ. And these activities also are meant to prepare us to participate more fully in God’s great mission. For it is God’s mission that we are called to. It is God’s mission that we have vowed to embrace through our baptismal covenant. It is God’s mission that gives true meaning to our lives.

Lent is to be a time of self-examination and repentance, preparing ourselves to face the various challenges of life, both known and unknown. If Jesus was led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil, surely we cannot escape the same. And in the face of temptations, whatever they may be, we have Jesus as our guide and model. “One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” While all that sounds great, what are we supposed to do today? How can self-examination lead to repentance? What can we learn from these sayings of Jesus? My sense is that Jesus is encouraging us to get our priorities straight. Don’t let your desire for food or drink distract you from what God is calling you to do, caring for those who are really in need of food, clothing, shelter, love. Don’t set up false idols, be that money or power or prestige, anything that takes our ultimate focus away from God’s great mission. But what does it mean to put the Lord our God to the test? I think it means that we presume we know more than God, or are wiser than God, or more loving than God. Whenever we set ourselves up in opposition to God, we are like a three-year-old testing our level of independence from our parents. Let’s grow up. Let’s own our own weaknesses and faults, for God promises to love us in spite of them. Remember, there is nothing you can do to stop God from loving you. So let’s give up on putting God to the test.

Again and again Jesus calls us to put God at the center of our lives. We are to love God above all else. And we also are to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. I find it easy to confess that I love God about all else, yet I murmur about needing a new cell phone, or I get overly obsessed with seemingly minor details. or complain about not having enough time to pray even though I spend an hour every day playing bridge online. Each of these complaints are directed at idols…things….control…my personal image. To love God above all else challenges me to adjust my perspective on life, to modify my priorities, to admit that I am a creature, not the Creator. As for loving my neighbors, well just ride along with me as I deal with these crazy drivers here in San Diego County. I find it all too easy to berate someone who cuts me off, not because their actions might cause an accident, but because they cut ME off. How dare they get in front of me? I am entitled to MY right of way, aren’t I? And then there are the neighbors who don’t think like me, or speak like me, or look like me. They make me uncomfortable. Do I have to love them too? Absolutely.

And let’s not forget the very end of the great commandment, to love others AS I love myself. If I don’t love myself very much, how can I love others? If I don’t cherish the gifts that God has given me, how can I value the gifts that others have to share? If I am constantly putting myself down, how can I lift others up? Let us love ourselves, as hard as that may be at times, so that we can follow Jesus more closely.

Lent is to be a time when we pray and fast and practice self-denial more deliberately. Again, these activities are meant to put God firmly at the center of our lives. Prayer is a vital part of our relationship with God. Whether we are thanking, asking, worshipping or just being silent in God’s awesome presence, prayer leads us away from a focus on ME toward a focus on WE, our relationship with God. The same is true for fasting and self-denial. Both turn our focus away from our wants and toward the needs of others. I fast so that I can have a truer sense of compassion for those who do without the necessities of life. I deny myself those attitudes and material items that puff me up so that I may see more clearly what is fundamental to my life and to the life of those around me. Prayer, fasting, self-denial, these help us become more open to God’s grace, more aware of our limitations, more ready to respond in loving service to others.

And Lent is a time in which we are called to read and meditate on God’s holy word. Just like prayer and fasting and self-denial, reading and meditating on God’s holy word teaches us how to deal with temptations, how to abandon our blindness to human need and suffering, how to counter our tendencies toward false judgments, uncharitable thoughts, prejudice, contempt toward others.

But, how do we make time in our busy schedule to encounter the Bible? Just Google “Episcopal Bible Study” or “Daily Office.” There are many options online for engaging with the Bible.

And I bet there is a Bible in your home. Pick it up. Open it. Read it. And if you don’t have a bible at home, take one of those from the book rack in youe pew. There are plenty more of them on the book shelves here at St. John’s. Also, don’t forget that there are two Bible study groups here at St. John’s. One is on Tuesday evenings, beginning at 6pm. Mike Gollihur facilitates that group. There is also a Wednesday morning session that begins at 9:30. the Rev. Cathey facilitates that gathering. You have many options. Which will you choose?

My sisters and brothers in Christ, let us keep a holy Lent through self-examination and repentance; through prayer, fasting, and self-denial; through reading and meditating on God's holy Word. Let us commit ourselves to walk more closely with God, and with each other, as we follow Jesus to Jerusalem…that site of great tragedy…and of even greater glory.