

The First Sunday in Lent
Year C

February 21, 2010

Going From I to We

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91

Romans 10:5-15

Luke 4:1-13

Your nostrils quiver at every scent in the air, the idea of food becomes reality. Gnats buzz your face and you see plump quail ready to be roasted. Dried springs of long dead brush look like apple trees hanging low with red globes of sweetness. Even rocks, baking in the sun, begin to resemble fresh loaves, dripping with olive oil. But there is nothing to eat. There is only the routine of sleep, waking, walking, sleeping, while your body gnaws away at the only thing there is to eat: itself.

But for those who are prepared, something else can happen in fasting. As the physical melts away, the spirit is left free. This freedom allows the spirit to see, even when the eyes blur. That's why every spiritual practice the world over, from Christianity to Hinduism--and everything in between--practices fasting. You have to stop chewing on the fruit of good and evil for awhile in order to understand that you probably don't know that much about good and evil after all.

At the end of Deuteronomy, the children of Israel stand at the edge of the desert, their forty years of migration over, a vast new land stretching before them. They have survived slavery, hunger, civil unrest, religious madness and religious malaise. They have survived attacks from their ancestral enemies and their ancestral friends. They have virtually nothing left but hope, a generation once lost, ready to renew itself in grace.

They are thinking about the possible future, when there will vines and fig trees, when the black earth will put forth its fruit, when they can trade and invest and retire old and happy. Moses looks over the vast crowd of people and reminds them that they are not a people with a background in real estate. Their forefathers after all, were wandering Arameans, and they had lived in other peoples' lands, where they had to trade their souls for food. Hunger had formed them into a people whose story started in famine but would end in milk and honey. Moses tells them that

what they are about to receive in the new world will never belong to them, and gives them a sacrament so that they will not forget:

Take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

When they gave their offering to the priest, they were to pray this prayer:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

It is a hard lesson to learn, and the children of Israel forgot it more often than they remembered it. Like them, we forget it too. We own nothing. Everything that we have, whether a lot or little, has come from the earth, which belongs to the Lord. Armies may hoist their flags over patches of dirt, whether little or great, pretending that raising a tiny piece of cloth carries a real meaning, pretending that it means the governments they represent can do with the land what they wish, extracting every last ounce of life, and trading it off for wealth and power. Eventually, though the Star of David fluttered above Israel’s army, it was no match for their failure to remember that the land was not really theirs, that other people matter, that justice matters, that enterprise is not and cannot be free, for it all belongs to the One who made it. After awhile, after it all, they lost it all.

In 2010, the Church enters this season of Lent, two years into what the media has dubbed “the Great Recession” without a sense of why we are here, what this time of fasting and preparation should mean for us, and how our spirits can learn to see again. This Lent should cause us to remember how we got here and why the world is in such deep trouble. The world needs us to see clearly and describe what we see, so that it might learn as well.

We got here because we began to believe a lie: that there is some all-knowing, all-powerful, “invisible hand” called “the Free Market” which guides those who believe in it into prosperity and freedom. We got here because we began to take the pagan idea of the Omniscient Market seriously. We stripped away the laws that restricted the worse sort of financial avarice. Banks began loaning money to people who had no possible way to pay it back, because underwriters believed that the Market God would miraculously provide them more money. Portfolio managers packaged those hopeless loans into huge baskets of offerings to the Market God, and for awhile it seemed that the Priests of the Market were right: housing prices soared, stocks gained dizzying new heights, money flowed freely in a drunken orgy of consumption.

But one day, like Toto in the palace of Oz, some little terrier pulled back the curtain in the Free Market Temple. And all that stood behind the curtain was a mirror. We stared in horror into our own tear-streaked faces. We were the Market God, and we had made up a whole world where you could rich by buying things, where you could never max out your credit lines, where you could live solely for yourself with nary a thought to the common good. Now the Free Market Temple has been repood, and everything up for auction.

Lent affords us an opportunity to reflect on the truth of our situation and learn to see again. Like Jesus, facing the devil in the desert, we can remember that it is God alone whom we must worship and God alone whom we must serve. Jesus, returning from his forty days of fasting and prayer in the wilderness, came to tell the truth to his nation. This Lent, we must learn the truth, and be ready to proclaim it to our nation and all the nations of the earth.

First of all, we do not live by bread alone. Material things are the source neither of life, nor of happiness. A society which values wealth over people is inching towards its own destruction. In America, the top 1 percent own \$3.3 trillion dollars in wealth, or 33.8 percent of the national assets. The next 9 percent hold 37.3 percent. That leaves 28.5 for the next 90 percent. Spend a Lenten meditation on that.

I will confess something to you. I am in that 90 percent. Odds are, you are as well. It makes me very uncomfortable to see that I am supporting a system where it is fine to redistribute wealth from the bottom up, just not from the top down. It is perfectly acceptable in our nation to revile the poor as criminal, drug-addled, baby-making machines, while advocating

redistribution of wealth to large corporations in the name of economic development. What is not acceptable in our nation is to proclaim that our present difficulties result from the worship of a lie and the abandonment of advancing the common good. What is not acceptable is the notion that we might have to pay for the things that we want. What is not acceptable is to proclaim that we are responsible for each other.

Lent can also teach us the necessity of worshipping God alone. The Free Market is not only not a God, it is not even free. It has limits, and those limits include the fact that the Free Market requires winners and losers and an ever-widening gap between them. Its limits mean that those who want no regulations on their ability to accumulate wealth will erect elaborate regulations to keep others from accumulating it. Eventually the Free Market crumbles under the weight of its own irony.

Lent can teach us to see clearly that we are all, in some sense, descendants of wandering Arameans. That we have nothing which has not been given to us and that in giving to those who have less than we do, we enrich us all. Learning this lesson well, we can shift our own priorities and those of our Church and our nation. We can do this, starting in our own lives with a re-ordering of our lives. Writing about the economic meltdown, pastor and writer Jim Wallis asks:

How will this crisis change us? The answer isn't going to be found in reading the latest economic analysis, hoping for better indicators, following a political ideology, or even updating the economy. It will be found as individuals, families, friends, small groups, churches, mosques, synagogues and entire communities wrestle with the question of values together.

In the offertory prayer Moses gives to Israel, the language moves from the individual: "A wandering Aramean was my father" to the social: "the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us"... "the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The redeemed and renewed society transforms the individual: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."

This Lent, in this time of spiritual hunger, can be the opportunity to shift our viewpoint from I to We. This Lent can be the time to rediscover who

we are as people of God, what our values are, and to hear the voice of God clearly against the noise of the market. Then we can tell the truth, the truth that we are in this together, that decisions made today effect tomorrow's children, and that we will no longer accept a society which lives only for the moment and devalues some people while declaring others masters of the universe. We can tell the truth that Lord requires that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before Him.

This Lent our hunger for the freedom of the spirit can liberate ourselves, our nation, our world.