

“What Do You Offer in Pledge of Your Vows?”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Lent, Sunday, March 14, 2021

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Holy Scriptures: Numbers 21: 4-9 Luke 4: 1-13

Numbers 21

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

⁶ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Holy Scriptures: Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² 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. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

Next Wednesday is St. Patrick's Day.

Wikipedia fact checker informs us

the day commemorates Saint Patrick
and the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.

Historically the Church's Lenten restriction on drinking alcohol
was lifted for the day.

Which, naturally, has encouraged and propagated the holiday's tradition
of liberal alcohol consumption on March 17.

And that, my friends, explains why the most unlikely folks
wear green hats, t-shirts and scarves that read, "Kiss me, I'm Irish."

A few years back St. Patrick's Day landed on a Saturday.

A wedding was held in downtown Decatur on the Square.

Decatur Square was well-populated and well, lit.

Several hundred people gathered.

Everyone was Irish for the day,

wearing green. bearing good, good vibrations,
from the fruit of the vine and hops of barley.

The Square featured drummers, bagpipers, a vibrant, festive spirit.

A wedding planned for that same afternoon,

planned except the couple hadn't planned
on a boisterous crowd of onlookers.

You see, the wedding couple hailed from elsewhere.

They had no idea there would be so many very, very happy people

filled with spirits, standing around the chairs
arranged with a center aisle and for 100 invited guests.

That afternoon I was the wedding officiant.

Like the couple, it was my introduction to St. Patrick's Day in Decatur.

I stood beside the Groom on the top step of the Gazebo,

he sporting a sharp tuxedo,
me in a clergy robe, stole flapping in the breeze,
wedding notes in hand,

both of us breathing in the energy and scenery of the moment.

Drummers were drumming, bagpipes wailed,

laughter and love were in the air.

Speaking into a microphone, my voice boomed

and echoed back from across the Square.

*"My friends, please give the happy couple 15 minutes of peace.
Consider yourselves welcome witnesses of their vows.
We will be so grateful."*

As groomsmen and bridesmaids processed to the gazebo,
the boisterous community grew quiet.

"If you are able, please stand."

As the bride and her father walked up the aisle,
a wave of people in green arose.

After the declaration of intent -- the part where the couple promises, saying "I do" --
and the exchange of vows,

I went over the meaning of wedding rings.

"The ring is a symbol," I said.

*"In marriage, it is the symbol of the uniting of two lives
in a holy venture which will last throughout life.*

*The ring symbolizes love because,
like the circular nature of love, it does not end.*

*It is, therefore, fitting that you bind your sacred vows
by the giving and receiving of a ring, a beautiful and meaningful symbol."*

"What do you offer in pledge of your vows?" I asked.

Now, you know that the expected response is "rings."

Except when asked *"What do you offer in pledge of your vows?"*
the groom said, *"My love."*

Oh!

"That is a great answer," I said to him. "You will do well."

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

There are other symbols that serve to remind us of vows we have made
and the depth of meaning they hold for us.

The Chalice: The Cup of Life.

The Bread: The Body of Christ.

A Church steeple. Baptistry and baptism font.

The image of a hands clasped in prayer.

The Cross, a visual, vivid reminder of how much God loves you.

This church's architecture symbolizes the open arms of Christ, open to the city.

These are symbols,

visual, constant, daily reminders of vows made
to honor our covenants with God and one another.

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

Consider the Hebrew scriptures, in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 21.

After the Hebrew people--our spiritual fore bearers--fled slavery in Egypt,

they spent many years in a time known as Exodus,
a long and difficult journey from bondage to freedom,
a spiritual journey from God's deliverance and liberation
to God's Promised Land.

All was not smooth and easy during their journey and wandering
toward the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey and rest.

"The people became impatient on the way.

The people spoke against God and against Moses,

'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.'"

*In their frustration and fear, impatience and desire to be in control,
some of the Hebrews cried out against the Lord.*

Suddenly a fiery serpent appeared and killed them.

The people of God repented:

"The people came to Moses and said,

'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you;

pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.'"

"So, Moses prayed for the people.

*And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole;
and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'*

*So, Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole;
and whenever a serpent bit someone,*

that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

We see the symbol of a fiery serpent wrapped around a pole
on ambulances and hospitals and the AMA.

When you think about it, God's action was fascinating.

God has the power to re-cast

an image of punishment to offer healing, from death to salvation.

The Lord took the same symbol of their punishment, the fiery serpent,
and used it as a symbol of their healing.

The symbol of God's love and healing power was so important
that once raised up, high above everyone's heads,

all could gaze upon it to see and believe

in God's power to heal our bodies and souls,

in God's desire to save us from death.

*"And so," said Jesus, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*

that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Once again, God radically converts a symbol,
this time of a Messiah crucified.

The symbol of the cross was to the Romans a symbol of punishment;
to the world it's a sign of folly, of foolishness, says Paul;
to those who see and believe and witness the love of God,
the cross is lifted to serve as a symbol of salvation and redemption.

Of course, unlike the fiery serpent in the wilderness,
God did not send Jesus as a form of punishment.
God sent Jesus to save the world.
God sent the Son, not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved, redeemed, restored through Him.
God sent Jesus as a living pledge of God's vow to love you.

In God's grace we find the true life in which we are a new creation.
God lifts our newly created selves for the world to see, to admire, to emulate.
Paul Tillich wrote, *"We want only to show you something we have seen
and to tell you something we have heard...that here and there in the world
and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation."* --The New Being

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

Of course, unlike the fiery serpent in the wilderness,
God did not send Jesus as a form of punishment.
God sent Jesus to save the world.
But first Jesus endured challenges in the wilderness
to his vow, his promise, his covenant with God.

When we read in the Gospels about Jesus being led by the power of the Spirit
to go into the desert to meet the devil
and to face whatever tests are placed before him,
we are overhearing Jesus' own experiential faith.
In effect he said to his disciples then and to his disciples today,
*'Here is my story, my testimony, take from it what you can and will
so you will be strong and prepared
for when the Tempter approaches you.'*

There are lessons to glean for healthy, hopeful living in the wilderness,
in hostile environments.

The Tempter will challenge vows made in public.

The evil one is a coward.

Patient, conniving, a bully, yet still a coward.

Evil will wait until you are hungry, and tired, and lonely,
famished for water and companionship and a clear vision.

The tempter will wait until you made a commitment of faith,
and catch you when your guard is down.

Jesus' experience in the desert came right after his baptism,

which mirrors our lives as well.

The tempter will patiently wait until the glory fades
and the hard work of being faithful begins.

The tempter will wait until after you have made a public confession of faith,
until after the baptismal waters recede,
until after you vowed "I do" to love your spouse,
or to raise your child as a Christian,
or to love and serve God through the church,
or to love your beautiful self as a creation of God.

Billy Joel hit on this in his song, Scenes from an Italian Restaurant:

*Brenda and Eddy were still going steady in the summer of '75
when they decided the marriage would be at the end of July
Everyone said they were crazy
"Brenda you know you're much too lazy
Eddie could never afford to live that kind of life."
But there we were wavin' Brenda and Eddie goodbye...
They started to fight when the money got tight
And they just didn't count on the tears.*

Only when the honeymoon is over
does the tempter move in to dissuade and distract and deter.

Any environment can be dangerous.

An environment, whether it is a physical place or spiritual plane or a relationship,
can quickly become hostile.

We don't have to go to the Sahara to know what it is like to walk in the desert.

Just as a quiet stream can become a flash flood in the blink of an eye,
when the going gets rough
even good friendships get testy and tested,
credit and debit concerns predominate world views,
misunderstanding escalates to mistrust,
confusion reigns over what to say yes and no to.

Jesus overcame evil by being very clear about his commitment to God.

God is first and foremost,
and everything else flows from that.

Since God's will is for the positive uplifting, reconciliation and renewal,
the forgiveness and salvation of all of creation,
than anything that seeks to distract or detour you
away from this source of goodness and hope
can and must be set aside as a temptation.

The tempter will take the Scriptures and quote them for selfish purposes,
telling you that what is most important is you.

You have heard the whispers in your ear, "*It's always all about you.*"

You will be tempted to better yourself solely for the sake of yourself.

The tempter will say that the most important question in your mind should be,
"What is in it for me?"

Jesus informed the tempter and he informs us that it is not all about us;
there is a lot more at stake.

The battle is cosmic.

And the final victory will be God's.

When the tempter finds you in a hostile environment

you'll be told to hold on to a lifestyle

that betters yourself and your own interests at other's expense.

You'll be invited to use your gifts and talents and resources

for self-improvement with no concern at all for the greater good.

The tempter quotes hymns and psalms and pretty language

until the cows come home,

all the while telling you that your primary spiritual focus in church
should be this: What are you getting out of it?

Rather than focusing on what God is calling you to do and be and share,

or how you might lift up the souls around you,

you'll be tempted to be a consumer, not a builder,

a user, not a giver, an addict, not a liberator.

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

Jesus responds with the perfect blend and balance

of heart and mind, body and soul.

He knows the Word of God and returns scripture for scripture.

His reason and faith meet.

Through the discipline of study he knows how to draw deep upon the Word.

At the same time, his faith and wisdom are a source of strength.

Put that together

and one can discern a spiritual path for living with hope
in a hostile environment.

Travel well the journey from heart to mind and back again.

Find a sense of balance in the spiritual disciplines of study and worship.

Walk the line of commitment to Christ

and connection with the experiential nature of the faith.

In due time Jesus looked back on his time in the desert,

a memorable experience of temptation and testing,

forty days and forty nights of hunger and thirst, heat and fear,

and as whenever he looked back

he could see that God had brought him through safely and to safety.

When he left the desert he was once again led by the power of the Holy Spirit,

even though he was not the same exact person

who had been led by the spirit into a time and place of testing.

Maybe he had a touch of gray.

Maybe a few wrinkles.
Maybe a few scars; whether visible or hidden, they were there just the same.
The tempter said he would return at an opportune time.
Yes, we know.
The tempter is a coward; persistent, a bully, but still a coward.
Jesus of Nazareth could celebrate.
This was a story worth repeating.
He resisted the wiles of the evil one not once or twice but three times,
and if he could do it, so can we.

What do you offer in pledge of your vows?

Oh yeah, you have got to hear how the wedding on St. Patrick's Day ended.
After the rings and the declaration that the couple were now married,
I said to the Groom, *"You may now kiss the bride!"*
The 100 guests and the surrounding sea of people in green let out a cheer.
They roared and clapped.
"You are warmly invited by the family to a lovely reception in the old courthouse."
The bride immediately leaned over the microphone.
"Only those who have invitations!"

The Good News is everyone is invited to a meal given in remembrance of Him.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!