

## FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 9, 2025

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 | PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16 | ROMANS 10:8B-13 | LUKE

4:1-14

Almost every funeral service we conduct here ends with the same prayer. We call it the Commendation, and its roots go back five hundred years to Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. It includes this line, "Acknowledge, we humble beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

It is beautiful, poetic, meaningful. It also seems a little bit strange. After a funeral service in which we've given thanks for the witness of this person's life and—hopefully—said a bunch of nice things about them, we throw in a little mention at the end that they were also a sinner. Even if they won a Nobel Peace Prize, fed the hungry, worked for justice and peace in all the earth, so on and so forth, that line stays in. "A sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

If it seems strange to us, that's probably because we so often think of sin as making bad choices. Sin is when you choose to steal twenty dollars from your neighbor's wallet. Sin is when you choose to cheat off your classmate's exam. Sin is when you leave worship early so you can get two apple fritter donuts at coffee hour.

In any event, we think of sin as something we do. It's as if we can count the number of sins we commit in a day. On a bad day, you'd have more sins. On a good day, you'd commit fewer sins. And your job as a Christian is to get that number as close to zero as possible.

But for St. Luke, sin has a rather different meaning. Sin is not about the choices you make. Sin is a failure to trust God. Every other sin, be it personal sin, institutional sin, or systemic sin comes from that lack of trust. So for us to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we don't just need to make better choices. We need to learn how to trust again.

That's the subtext in today's gospel reading. After his baptism, heads into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days. And during that time, he was tempted by the devil—a representation of evil—three times. Once to make stone into bread. Once to govern all the earth. And once to protect himself from all harm.

Each temptation is unique in its own way. But the root of them is the same. You shouldn't trust God, the devil says. You can't rely on God. You can't depend on God. But you know who you can trust, can rely on, and can depend on? You.

That's what the temptation is in this story. It's not just about bread or power or health. The devil tempts Jesus by suggesting that maybe he shouldn't rely on God. Maybe he should just rely on himself. Instead of a life open to God's purpose and call, he could live a life according to his own desires and convenience.

When Martin Luther imagined a life marked by sin, he didn't imagine it as people with an extra twenty dollars in their pocket. Or with a copied essay. Or with a suspicious amount of apple fritter donut glaze on their hands. He said that it was someone so taken with themselves and so reliant on their own ability that they became turned in on

themselves. No longer open to the calling of God. No longer able to see the needs of their neighbors. Always caught up in their own interests and agendas and projections.

That inwardness is the temptation of our own lives, too. Who do we trust? We trust our plans. We trust our lawyers. We trust our financial advisors. We trust our intuition. Do we trust God? Maybe. Just this past week, I had a long conversation with someone about mission and ministry here at CCLC. And after the meeting was over, I realized that not only had I forgotten to open the meeting with prayer. (I was too busy, of course.) I realized that I'd talked about staff and budgets and projects and volunteers and relationships, but never once in the entire conversation had I mentioned God.

That's the thing about temptation. Temptation doesn't announce itself with flashing lights and a warning label from the surgeon general. It appeals to our own interests, our own ego, and our own vanity. That's exactly what the devil does in today's reading.

But Jesus sees through the evil's conceit. And he doesn't just reject what the devil offers him but he actively states his trust in God. *One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. He will command his angels... to protect you.* In every case, Jesus doesn't just reject the stuff the devil offers but he also rejects the story the devil offers. No, Jesus says, I can rely on God. I trust that God is sustaining my life, and so instead of being turned in on myself, I'm open to wherever God is calling me.

And why can Jesus trust God? Why can Jesus turn away from the devil's call? We heard it right at the beginning of today's reading. Because Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit." For St. Luke, the Holy Spirit makes all the difference in Jesus's ministry. The Holy Spirit is what gives his ministry strength and power and direction. And the Holy Spirit makes all the difference for us, too.

When we are baptized, we are "marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit." And so the Spirit that initiated and sustained Christ's life and ministry now initiates and sustains our own. And so we are empowered to trust God, love our neighbors, and set free from our inwardness that wants to make everything all about me.

So are we sinners? You bet. If we were left to our own devices, we couldn't fear, love, and trust God above all else. We'd spend our lives trying to pull ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps and only getting more turned in on ourselves.

But here's the thing. We're not left to our own devices. We're joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And now, his Spirit goes with us everywhere we go. The Spirit that recasts our neighbors as gifts instead of burdens. That Spirit that transforms God from a source of fear to cause for joy. The Spirit that creates faith—trust—in God's promises for the sake of the world.

We are sinners, of course. We can never trust God with our whole heart and mind and strength. Only Christ can do that. But we're redeemed sinners. Because thanks to the gift of Christ's Spirit, we are always growing into his life.

And that just might put Cranmer's prayer in a new light. You are "a sheep of [God's] own fold, a lamb of [God's] own flock, a sinner of [God's] own redeeming." And for that, we say, "Thanks be to God."

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