

Celebration of gifts will be our focus in worship for the next few weeks. In looking over the lectionary readings assigned to the Sundays of Lent, it appears to me that various gifts are emphasized. Today we are going to lift up the gift of opportunity. Over the next few weeks we will explore together the gifts of family, intimacy, forgiveness and welcome, the gift of Christ, the gift of celebration and party, and the gift of Christian community.

Today let us lift up the gift of opportunity. As our first reading today gives witness to, opportunities come in various ways. Some opportunities are not always good. Jesus was given some opportunities in the passage that Christina read.

We are told that Jesus is 30 years old and he begins his ministry according to Luke in this passage. His first ministry assignment is to be led out into the wilderness. One would assume that in Israel this meant that Jesus was led out into the desert. He fasted for 40 days out in the desert wilderness.

Here we see this number 40 again in the Bible. The number 40 appears several times. You may remember that it rained for 40 days while Noah was in the ark. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Moses ascended the mountain to be with God for 40 days. 40 is one of those biblical numbers that gets repeated. It gets repeated as a number which shows a time of testing and challenge and a time of completion.

So Jesus takes 40 days to fast and prepare himself for the opportunities which will be presented to him. But the first opportunities presented to him come not from God but from the devil. He is presented the opportunity to turn rocks into food. Remember, he has not eaten for 40 days. He is beyond famished. But when given this opportunity to feed himself, he turns it down. "One does not live by bread alone," he responds.

Then he is led up a mountain where he is presented a wide view of the world and is told that he can have all of this if he would just worship the devil and seek to follow the ways of evil. Of course, the view from God's perspective is much larger than the view of evil in the world. But Jesus responds and says that one is to worship the Lord and serve only God.

Jesus is then given another opportunity. This time Jesus is given the opportunity to throw himself off the side of the mountain and trust that God will take care of him. Sounds like a good opportunity to show he can do anything. But Jesus responds to this opportunity by reminding the devil and himself to not put the Lord to the test.

Jesus has all of these opportunities presented to him. Opportunities to show in that moment who was in charge according to the way the world defined power. But Jesus responds by rejecting every opportunity. For he shows that not every opportunity which we are presented with is a good opportunity. Sometimes opportunities which we think are so tempting could, in fact, be disastrous for us. But whether the opportunity before us is life sustaining or destructive is not always so clear.

A colleague of mine tells about the time she was with her 3 year old son when he asked her preacher mom, "Hey mom. What do you know about the devil?" Wondering where his question was originating, she turned the question back onto him.

"What do you know about the devil? He then dropped his voice to a loud whisper and said to his mom, "If we were in a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle and there was candy, the devil would say, "you should take some."

Mom was very proud of what her son had learned in church that day in Sunday School. So she then asked him, "Son, if I was in a store with your Dad and we were in another aisle and the devil offered you some candy, what would you say?" To which her son replied, "I would say thank you, of course."

So how do we know whether or not an opportunity which is being presented to us is a good opportunity? How do we know if the opportunity before us is one which is coming from God? How do we know if the opportunity before us is one which we should take? Those are all very hard questions.

Every one of us faces opportunities. Some of us are presented opportunities for a new job. Some of us are presented opportunities for a new relationship. Some of us are presented opportunities for some type of major financial investment. Some of us are presented opportunities concerning education. Some of us are presented opportunities to make a major change in our life.

How do we know whether an opportunity before us is from God? How do you know if the time is now to follow the opportunity before you?

I want to invite the Old Testament passage into the conversation at this point. The Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy originates from the time that the Israelites have been wandering in the desert for 40 years; there is that number 40 again. After wandering in the desert for 40 years they are ready to enter into the land that they have been promised. But rather than race into the territory with a reckless abandon, they are given guidance to set aside the first fruits of the land and to give these first fruits as an offering to God.

They are reminded that before they seize an opportunity which has been presented to them, that they must first recognize that all good opportunities come from God. They are reminded that before they do anything with their opportunities, they must trust God with the first fruits of what the opportunity provides. Not the leftovers. But the first fruits.

Something interesting about the opportunities that Jesus was offered. He was offered 3 opportunities. The first opportunity which he was offered was the opportunity to turn stones into bread. He does not do this. But later in Jesus's ministry he does something very similar. When faced with thousands of hungry people, Jesus turns a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish into an abundance of food.

The second opportunity which the devil offers to Jesus is to claim political power and rule the world. Jesus does not take this opportunity. But Jesus spent the rest of his 3 years on earth proclaiming God's justice and God's peace and God's rule.

The third opportunity which Jesus is offered is to risk death. He does not claim this opportunity. But we know that the end of Jesus' life he was killed but he triumphed over that death and was resurrected to new life.

We all are presented opportunities. And in our fear we may think if we don't jump on the first opportunity we will miss out forever. The new relationship offer. The new job offer. The new offer of whatever. But I wonder if these texts teach us something important about opportunities.

Sometimes we may be presented an opportunity which may seem to fit our time but it may not fit God's time. Some opportunities that look so promising and tempting may not be from God.

But while we figure out what opportunities are from God and which ones are not, we are invited to be generous with what we already have. To return to God the first fruits of whatever our opportunities provide. While we wait for the right opportunity, we give ourselves fully to serving God. AMEN.

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-Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2

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"The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's certainty." Cathleen Falsani