

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, March 1, 2015
Second Sunday in Lent – Communion
First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT
“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

Texts: I Corinthians 11:23-25; Matthew 4:1-4

I Corinthians 11:23-25

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Matthew 4:1-4

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”



<http://www.kodachrome.org/shepherd/sonrise2003/images/021-cup-bread-communion.jpg>

I don't know what, if anything, you all have given up for Lent. I do know that Sue Craffey suggested in a recent email that it would be good if we could give up snow shoveling for Lent. As much as I've enjoyed snow*shoeing* in the woods this winter, I'm all in favor of Sue's suggestion that it would be good to give up snow*shoveling*.

Thanks to my wife Mary's suggestion and encouragement, she and I have decided to give up bread for Lent. This has already been quite the challenge for me, since I really like all kinds of bread. Full disclosure: earlier this week, when Mary and I and our son Ethan went to a Middle Eastern restaurant after a lecture at Yale Divinity School, I couldn't resist the warm fresh pita bread that was served with our meal.

Giving up bread for Lent has given me a renewed appreciation for Sundays, since Sundays during Lent are not fast days, so I'm free to eat bread today (more than just communion bread!). Giving up bread for Lent has also given me a different perspective on today's biblical story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, from which I've drawn my sermon title: One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

When Jesus was baptized, and just as he had come up out of the water, he saw a vision and heard a voice. The vision was of the Spirit of God, and the voice was the voice of God. Both the vision and the voice identified Jesus as the beloved Son of God. Whatever Jesus' sense of himself might have been before the baptism, it was no doubt different after the baptism. And then that same Spirit drove him into the wilderness.

It's a common feature in many religious traditions that great spiritual leaders like Jesus face a time of testing, when they have to spend time alone, fasting and praying, to discern what this new identity means for their vocation, for their place and calling in the world. In Jesus' case, that time of testing included a direct encounter with God's strongest adversary, the Evil One, at a time when Jesus would have been at his weakest from his forty-day fast.

Tradition says that Jesus' desert encounter with the devil took place on a barren mountain overlooking Jericho. During his long fast, Jesus would have seen countless stones shaped like small loaves of bread covering the ground. So the voice in the wilderness could easily whisper to him: If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.

The voice, and the reader, assume that it is well within Jesus' power to perform precisely this kind of miracle, to use his divine sonship for his own self-fulfillment. (Later on in the Gospel, Jesus will perform the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes "in a deserted place" [14:13-21]—which is almost as unheard-of as turning stones into bread—to feed not himself, but his hungry followers.)

Whether the voice in the wilderness is mocking or seductive, its purpose is clear: to tempt Jesus to perform a manna-like miracle in the desert, and thus to demonstrate that he is indeed the Son of God. Jesus' response to this temptation is, appropriately enough, drawn from the scriptural narrative of Israel's wilderness experience (Deut. 8:3): "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

As we seek to discern the meaning(s) of this first-century biblical story for our life as Christians in the twenty-first century, we begin by recognizing that this narrative of

Jesus' wilderness experience is not, at least initially, about us. This is not a self-help manual for individuals struggling with their personal demons or temptations. It's all about Jesus: about his *identity* as God's beloved Son and his *vocation* to announce & embody the reign of God on earth.

At the same time, the story of Jesus' wilderness experience does relate to us. It relates to us as Jesus' *followers*, about discerning *our* identity and *our* vocation in *our* time and place. The question for today is: what might it mean for us to learn anew how to live by the Word of God?

When Jesus spoke of "living by the word of God," he was not speaking of what we know today as the Bible. Rather, I suspect that he was probably referring to both the written and the oral traditions that eventually became the "Old Testament" (a better name for which is the "Hebrew Bible"). This ancient collection of sacred texts and traditions has its center of gravity in the story, the narrative, of a particular people—the descendants of Abraham and Sarah—and their struggles to live into the identity that God has bestowed on them as God's chosen people.

To live by the word of God is to live by this ancient sacred story, with its many episodes of human failure and divine mercy. For the church in today's world, to live by the word of God is to receive the story of Jesus and his followers as the continuation and fulfillment of this ancient sacred story. It's also to face the challenges of living into the Jesus story in today's world, into the identity and vocation that God bestows on us as followers of Jesus, who is God with us.

In a little while, following this morning's worship service, I'll be leading the first in a series of four congregation-wide conversations about discerning your identity and vocation in today's world. These congregation-wide conversations will help you write the next chapter in your story as a people of God, as a beloved community, here by the river. These conversations will help you discern anew how God is calling you to live into the ever ancient, ever new story of Jesus and his followers. They will help you renew your confidence that God provides manna in the wilderness, bread for the journey, and wisdom for the way that lies before you. For we do not live by bread alone, but by the word of God as well, by that ever-ancient, ever new story of Jesus, of our Immanuel, of God with us.

Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.