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First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

The Joy of Lent

It's well-known that the earliest groups of Christians from the first century and early second century—what we call the primitive Church—were periodically subject to persecution, to greater and lesser degrees, varying from benign indifference to active, violent oppression.

The day after Christmas, for example, we observe the feast of St. Stephen, whom we refer to as the proto-martyr of the Church, the first martyr. The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament tell how he was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin after witnessing to Christ (Acts 7:54-60). There is a nineteenth-century engraving of St. Stephen's martyrdom that can be found online. In it, a very angry man is standing over a crouching Stephen, the former holding a big rock about the size of a Thanksgiving turkey. It must have taken a lot of energy to stone people back in the day; you really had to be committed.

Soon enough, of course, there would be an acceptance of the Church by the Roman empire—not soon enough for Stephen, of course, but not too long anyway by the standards of world history. Then there would even be a kind of state adoption of Christianity as the religion of the empire, for reasons, no doubt, both pious and political. There are no pure motives, for emperor Constantine or for us ... but especially not for Constantine.

As a result, there were fewer Stephens after the fourth century, which was a good thing. But one of the consequences of that early persecution is that it had really put things in perspective. That early Church, they really had to decide: did they really believe this Jesus stuff, or not? There were no part-timers in the early Church. You had to either be in all the way, or not be in at all. There would be a guy holding a sword to your neck, or a rock over your head, and he would ask you, Yes or no? And you had to answer. Jesus: yes or no? To say no, and repudiate Jesus, was to save your life, but lose your faith. To say yes, and claim Jesus, was to lose your life, but live your faith. It put things in perspective. You had to decide.

That went away with a state sanction of Christianity, which—I repeat—was a good thing. But there were Christians who were suspicious of this suddenly much easier discipleship. There were people, especially in Egypt, who were suspicious of a comfortable, lax, cosmopolitan, Christianity, where you could be a leading light of the city, well-cultured and well-respected, if kind of fuzzy on the faith, and still be considered a great Christian. State sanction meant a reduction in opportunities for the kind of heroism that they had in the early Church.

They also pointed out, correctly, that Jesus himself was suspicious of a comfortable, lax Christianity as well, the kind that doesn't affect your daily life very much. If you look at the seven letters to the churches in Asia, in the book of Revelation, some of those churches are doing pretty well, and some of them are doing not so well, but all of them come in for criticism, by Jesus, for

their acculturation to the mores of their surrounding community (Revelation 2—3). Every single one of them.

But what do you do, if you're a zealous, faithful, third- or fourth-century Egyptian Christian in a faithful ancient Egypt? How do you prove your mettle? In time, some of them decided to move out of the cosmopolitan Alexandria and into the desert, where they could spend their days in prayer and fasting and self-denial, and undertake a different kind of heroic Christianity. This was the beginning of the monastic movement, and these were some of the first monks. They left the city, with its comforts and its easy faith, and they moved into the desert, alone. They took literally Jesus' counsel that "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). So that's what they did. They were Biblical literalists on that point: sell it all and follow Jesus.

In some ways this worked out for them, but in other ways it didn't. It turned out that the disciplines they practiced in the desert did, in fact, bring them closer to Jesus. They weren't masochists; they weren't interested in pain or discomfort for its own sake. They weren't just being tough guys, either, and showing off. They did all their marathon praying and extreme fasting and self-denial because they were lovers of Christ and they wanted to be with him, the way that the chaste bride craves to be with the groom on their wedding day. They were in love with Jesus and to be close to Jesus, to be part of him, is to be the fullest expression of the human being, and all of this seeming mortification brought them intimacy with Christ, brought them a growing sense of faithfulness, it brought them, even, joy. A different kind of joy, sure—not the joy of the late-night party or the enjoyment of luxury—but a joy that made them feel complete. They were in love with Jesus and they wanted the closest possible relationship with him and that's how they went about it, and it really did bring them joy, there in the desert.

What didn't work out for them is that people wouldn't, it turned out, leave them alone. They left the city and then the city followed them. Because even some of those Alexandrians who were not called to live a monastic desert life still wanted to be close to Jesus, too. The non-monastics wanted to feel the joy of a life in Christ, too, and they realized that those desert fathers had figured out a way to do it, strange as it might sound. Even if the cultured city-dwellers couldn't go in all the way, like the desert fathers did, they still wanted to be part of it somehow. And so they did: they went out in small groups, then by the dozens, then by the hundreds. They wouldn't leave the monks alone. Some of the monks had wanted to be hermits, but people kept coming around and asking them questions and participating as much as they could. And it worked for them, too. They found joy in the monastic disciplines also. The monks were on to something.

Which brings us to Lent in the year 2019, in this place, in our lives, a long way from first-century Palestine, a long way from fourth-century Egypt. Fewer martyrs for the faith, at least here. You probably won't be confronted with a life-or-death choice between faith and apostasy next time you're getting your coffee at Wawa. If you talk publicly about Jesus as the savior, probably no one will pick up a big rock and throw it toward your head. And it is a good thing—I repeat again—it is a good thing that that won't happen.

But something is lost, as the Egyptians realized. The thing about that engraving of Stephen is that, while the rock is about to be launched, you can see that he's still proclaiming the good news of God in Christ, unabashed, unashamed ... and even joyful.

In our more peckish moods, we may perhaps lament the drudgery of a depressing Lenten discipline and the tedious, mournful litany of our sins and things like that. We can see it as an oppressive ecclesial suppression of our otherwise having fun, as a doleful church trying to make us feel bad about ourselves. But the point—the end goal—of Lent isn't about feeling bad. On the contrary, it's about feeling happy, fulfilled, fully alive, and living into the full stature of Christ. We

are not trying to appease God with our Lenten practices; God's well-being doesn't depend on us. God doesn't need anything from us; God doesn't need us at all.

We also don't observe Lent because we want God to love us more. God's love doesn't change. It can't be increased by what you do, just like it can't be decreased by what you do. The point isn't that Lenten practices are good for God; the point is that repentance and Lenten self-discipline is good for us. Ask the Alexandrians. Ask the monks. Lenten discipline isn't about punishment; it's about joy. Jesus said, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). A joy that is complete: that's the goal of Lent. Not the partial joy that comes from accruing new things; not the passing joy of certain experiences. A complete joy, forever.

It is about the joy of sharing in Christ's cross in order to share in Christ's resurrection. It's the joy of the monastics; it's the joy of the martyrs; it's the joy of the saints. It's the joy of Jesus, putting off the temptations in the desert in order to share in the resurrection joy that was to come. The bread itself wasn't enough; the kingdoms of the world weren't enough; superhuman ability and worldly fame weren't enough. That stuff would all pass away; they would be an incomplete joy.

Lenten joy is a strange joy, to be sure. But it leads to a joy that is complete, to a joy that is eternal. It is the path to Easter joy, which is the joy of heaven.