

## Toeing the Line

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16 2-25-07

We entered the season of Lent as of last Wednesday. If you grew up when I did and were part of a church, you know that this time of year has a special significance for Christians. It took me a long time to put all the pieces together and to see the entire picture.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Easter Sunday. There are forty days and nights in this season. Sundays do not count. They are always feast days. The color is purple, that of royalty or penance, the same color we use for the season of Advent. Easter is reckoned as the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox—March 21.

During the days and nights of this season, when we think of it, we know that we should toe the line a bit more in the practice of our faith. The theory is that if we manage to do this for the forty days and nights of the season, we might just begin to do it for the rest of the year.

We “give up something for Lent” to prove that we are good at resisting temptation. We pattern this behavior on the temptations Jesus resisted while spending his forty days and nights in the wilderness. Our temptations pale in comparison to those he faced. Hunger was the first and a quick fix of turning stone into bread was suggested by the power that tempted him. He refused to perform this magic trick. The second was the acquisition of fame and power. Once again, Jesus declined the invitation. And the last, to overcome death through a dramatic move, was also rejected. The tempter skulked away to wait for a more opportune time to try again to lead him astray.

Some believe his tempter was the devil in full regalia, others believe that his struggles were more internal--a battle of his soul and own will with what he understood to be God’s will for his life. Neither interpretation is wrong. The point to consider above all else in this story is that he managed to keep his focus on what it was he had been sent to do and was not led astray by easy answers and by putting himself above all others in life. He understood the need for sacrifice—for giving up what he might have wanted to serve a wider purpose.

He understood sacrifice from his study of the Hebrew scripture in which the nation Israel was called to give to God what was due the Creator. In Deuteronomy the Israelites are seen being urged to give the first fruits of their land to God in gratitude for what it was God had brought them through and for the land they finally occupied. Because of God’s good and gracious gifts to them, they were asked to sacrifice a portion of all they had by returning it to God. This is a little like our weekly offering. We are asked to return a portion of all we owe God for the very lives we lead and enjoy.

Jesus was thought of as the first fruits of a life lived in accord with God. Paul often looked at him in this manner and his words in his Letter to the Romans echo this thought. Through his sacrifice all will be brought to God if people choose to follow the Way, the Truth and the Life.

We always have a choice as to the way we will live our lives. This is free will—a wonderful and yet challenging gift given us by a God who loves us and trusts that we will always seek to follow the right pathway in life. This great freedom, as do all great freedoms, comes with a heavy measure of responsibility. We are challenged to lead the way for others, by example, into the pathways of Christ. We are asked to commit our lives to living his life and teachings as well as we can.

True, there are times when we look at the whole package of what we are called to do and shake our heads in despair, feeling that we cannot ever measure up. But, as with all things in life, we need to be able to move forward in small ways to accomplish our goals.

If we are a little weak in the forgiveness venue, we need to pause and reflect on our lack and then take a step or two to correct it. Not forget it, we often cannot or will not. But to let go of the injury or

to ask someone for forgiveness for the injury we have caused him or her. Then we need to stop playing it over and over in our hearts and minds.

If we tend to be overly judgmental, when we know we are not to pass judgment on others, we can begin to curb this tendency and develop more of “a live and let live” philosophy of life. No one has been put here to live up to our expectations. If we think they have been, we need to get over it. There is a lot of disappointment in expectations

If we tend to be a bit unloving toward our fellow humans we need to soften our stance and understand that everyone needs love to nourish and encourage them through life. Even those difficult folks we find it hard to love. Even those who seem to reject the love we have for them. A relatively wise person told me a while ago that “We must never give up on love.” He is right even though it often appears far easier just to walk away.

If we have little to no hope, we need to reflect on this season of growing hope as we walk toward Easter with Christ. There is always hope in the resurrection of our lives. There is always hope in new beginnings, in revivals of what it is that lies before us. We need to choose to hope and pray that things will be better and that new doors will be opened. Or, perhaps, that we finally have the eyes and hearts to see that the doors have been shown to us long ago and now we are the ones who need to begin to journey through them.

Every minute offers us the opportunity to begin life anew. This period of Lent should remind us of this more than any other time of the year. We need to take time for the next 36 days and nights to toe the line a little bit more closely, to call to mind the life and teachings of the one whom we call our “Master.” We need to integrate what we see and hear into our hearts, souls and minds and into all we think and do and say. Our goal is to become more Christ-like and to have others see what his life has meant to us as we reach out to them. If it has meant nothing, we will do nothing. If it has meant even a little, much will happen.

There is a tiny little gospel hymn that reminds us of what we need to do at this time and at all other times of our lives. The words are these:

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me,  
 All his wonderful passion and purity.  
 O Thou Spirit divine  
 All my nature refine  
 Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me. Amen