



**Mennonite
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Formation

Sermon

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Challenge at the Crossroads

Summoned and Sent

More than 3000 years ago, in the desert by the banks of the Jordan, Moses called together a bunch of tired and dispirited survivors of slavery and put before them the greatest decision anyone will ever make, namely, whether to be faithful to the calling and mission of God. That event is recounted for us in Deuteronomy, our primary text for this gathering. An early version of it came to light in Jerusalem several hundred years later, during the days of Jeremiah. The form in which we know it emerged likely during or shortly after the exile in Babylon.

Why does that bit of history matter at an occasion such as this? Well, when the authors of Deuteronomy placed those words onto a scroll several hundred years after Moses first called the people together, they were challenging their own people, in their own time and place, to face that same decision.

By then much water had passed under Israel's bridge: the land had occupied them more than they had occupied it; the worship of the One God had given way to apostasy; military and economic glory had long ago already given birth to oppression and violence; imperial arrogance had led finally to exile in Babylon. What a fall.

In reminding the people of that day in the desert, Deuteronomy told them: It's not over; you can go back out to the desert, and face that test all over again: what will it be, you who stand at the crossroads? Faithfulness or unfaithfulness? Promise or peril? Life or death?

Centuries later yet, Moses' challenge was echoed in the preaching of that great desert prophet, John the Baptist, calling on the sons and daughters of Israel to leave the land, to come out to that same wilderness where Moses once summoned the people, and in baptism to go through the Jordan in order to symbolically reenter the land, ready now for the kingdom of God.

One of those who heeded this call, Jesus of Nazareth, went out to the desert and placed himself among the people at the Jordan, in solidarity with all those who were turning toward and preparing themselves for the reign of God. There he heard those ancient words spoken at the coronation of Israel's kings: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" "You are messiah!" "You are king!"

No sooner had Jesus heard these majestic words of commission and sending than the Spirit "threw him into the desert," as Mark puts it, to be tested. Just as a millennium earlier that wilderness had seen the people of God tested as to "what was in their heart," as Deut 8 puts it, so now Jesus faced his own test, one that went to very core of his mission and how he would carry it out, a test that would not let up until his death on the cross. For him, "crossroads" was not only a moment of decision; it would be the trajectory of his life. As Matthew relates it, the Tester holds before Jesus the perks of being a Messiah: to be able to make bread out of stone, to count on God's miraculous protection, and to have absolute control over the world's peoples—food, security, and power.

I want us to notice something: at every test, Jesus responds by reciting words from the same scroll we have been listening to these days, Deuteronomy:

- On whether to turn stones into bread, Jesus quotes Deut 8:3: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."
- On whether to jump off the highest point in the temple to prove God's care of his Chosen One, he responds with Deut 6:16: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test."
- On whether to exercise imperial control over the affairs of the world, Jesus responds with

Deut 6:13: "The LORD your God you shall fear, and him only shall you serve."

At each point Jesus refuses to enter the palace and goes rather to stand in the desert with the people in their most vulnerable time of testing. By relating this event half a century later, Matthew, much like Deuteronomy, wishes his readers, who have said yes to following Jesus, to see themselves in these tests, and that includes us here today in the wealthy and powerful global north: food, security, and power.

With respect to stones and bread, the poor of our world are becoming ever more restless and angry in their hunger, a hunger that is at least in part a result of our ways of producing, controlling, and pricing the food we grow, some of which we are callously feeding our vehicles. We in Canada and the US are being tested, not quite like Jesus who had too little food, but on what we do with too much. How do we, at this moment in history, keep our bread from becoming stones in the mouths of the hungry? This is for us nothing less than a test of our loyalty to God, a test on whether we will be true to God's mission in this world.

But before we leave this first test, we should notice that Jesus responds to the Tempter with: "we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Yes, we do indeed live by bread. But we do not live by bread alone. We are as church being tested today not only on what we do with our bread, but on whether we will offer the "word coming from the mouth of God" to those whose deepest hunger is not stilled by bread. Note well: sharing and proclaiming the gospel of the Bread of life is every bit as much a matter of peace and justice as is sharing our daily bread! A true peace church knows that.

It is true that too often what passes for evangelism has betrayed the kingdom Jesus came to announce; the gospel has been wedded to imperial politics, to religious and cultural arrogance, and to an individualism that turns its back on the world. A gospel that leaves creation to rot is not the gospel of the One through whom all things came to be and who gave his life to save it, as the hymn from Colossians 1 reminded us last night. A gospel that offers private insurance with no fine print on the hazards and obligations is bogus; it is not the gospel Peter and Paul preached. The gospel of the kingdom is not a ticket out of here; it is a ticket into here, into this world.

So, let's never disparage sharing the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transforming life in Christ. Let us rather pray to be evangelized ourselves all over again, to rediscover the full and whole gospel, to learn again the ancient ways and forge new and fresh language that can once again communicate the hospitality and

transforming power of the kingdom. We won't find those words unless the Word takes on flesh in our own lives; that is when bread and word become one in our witness.

We have our own form of Jesus' second test: ever since 9/11 "security" has become the obsession of our time. The issue is playing itself out in the politics both south and north of the border, from war to economics. Yes, security is a real and important concern, most especially if it is the security of the most vulnerable in our society and our world we are most concerned about. We are right to wrestle—as we are—with what it means to protect the most vulnerable in our world. But for us Mennonites here in the global North the security and safety test has less to do with "them" than it does with "us." Our societies' mad search for security, which will only increase in intensity as more and more lay claim to the earth's fragile and limited resources, is killing us—and them. Are we not thereby putting God to the test? By expecting God to miraculously deliver us from the mess we are making with our environment in this frantic rush to secure our own lives, that is exactly what we are doing. Will we trust God enough to disarm body, mind, and heart—and border, and market—even as we struggle for true security of those most vulnerable?

The lure of power and control, represented in the third test, is closely related. Jesus' refusal to grasp the reigns of power stands in stark contrast to the imperial aspirations of his time, and ours. Think not only of the military means of dominance and control, however, but of the way we seek dominance in work and relationship. The spirit of entitlement and the presumed right to dominate our world has colonized our imaginations also in the church. To fear only God, as Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, is to fear no one, and thus also to forego the need to dominate and control.

In the end, in all of these tests, the point is, of course, not so much to say NO to selfishness, domination, and violence. It is, much more importantly, to say a resounding YES to following a deliberately vulnerable Jesus into the world with deep and abiding trust in God.

Remarkably, there were those who took up Jesus' challenge and joined him in his mission. Stirred by news of kingdom, cross, and resurrection, springing up in the most unlikely places within a few short years were what we might call "cells" or "colonies of the kingdom," microcosms of an alternative world, families of sisters and brothers drawn together from well beyond the borders of biological, ethnic, and racial kinship —Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, wealthy and poor, strong and weak.

That great prophet to the Gentiles, Paul, wrote a magnificent manifesto of peace to some of these "cells of the kingdom", as we might call the

house-churches in the urban wilderness of high culture, brute force, callous power and privilege we know as Rome. He summoned them as Moses once did Israel to remember the covenant they had once made at their baptism, and once again to stand and offer themselves to God. We are right tonight to hear that summons as directed to us:

“I urge you, sisters and brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is the worship that makes sense. Don’t be conformed to the prevailing ethos of our time, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you might be able to discern what is good, and acceptable, and perfect.” (Rom 12:1-2) — “so that you might be a wise and discerning people,” the Deuteronomist might have said.

With words that are like IEDs, improvised explosive devices of grace, Paul spells out for these believers what a sacrifice of thanksgiving looks like. I give you just a few examples from the RRLB (the “Really Really Living Bible”, also known as the TYN), which turns out to capture far better, in my unbiased opinion, the energy of Paul’s own language:

- (8) Exercise mercy with hilarity! I caught a hint of that recently when an Aboriginal man, interviewed for his response to Canada’s official apology for the cultural genocide perpetrated through the residential schools, said simply: “I get high off of forgiveness.” Now that is “hilarious mercy.”
- (9) Let nothing or no one water down the intensity and integrity of your love!
 - Don’t just avoid evil, loathe it!
 - Stick like crazy glue to the good!
 - Compete ferociously in honouring each other! (10)
- Don’t fret about your own comfort and safety! (12)
- (13) Feel the needs of your brothers and sisters, wherever they are on the globe, so strongly that they become your own!
 - Party with those who are thrilled with life, and cry your eyes out with those whom life has ravaged. (15)
 - Hang out with those who are on the margins of society, and assume they’re a lot wiser than you are! (16)
 - Persecute strangers with love! (13) (that’s a literal translation, by the way; beats the NRSV’s rather gutless “extend hospitality”, don’t you think?)
 - Bless those who persecute you! (14) In other words, “persecute your persecutors with love!”
 - Don’t retaliate, but surprise your tormentors with disorienting kindness. (19-20)
 - Win over evil—with good! (21)

Sounds Anabaptist, doesn’t it? Except that it depicts discipleship with a whole lot more energy than we usually do. That’s because living the Jesus way is, in Paul’s view, nothing less than grateful worship—the only worship that makes sense in light of God’s grace and mercy. In the end we are, of course, not being called to be better Anabaptists. This is bigger, much bigger: this is about being the people of God, the body of the Messiah, sent on a mission we share with all those who have tasted the grace of God, regardless of their denomination or tradition. We are summoned and sent, called into dispersion, spread as manna on the earth. We are to enter and engage the world with the good news of Jesus Christ, participating in God’s counter-empire, as we might call the “kingdom,” in which lordship looks like servanthood, in which victory comes via the deliberate vulnerability of those who take up the cross, in which strangers are pursued with both bread and word, where in turn pursuers and persecutors are blessed, and in which the earth is treated as a gift to be treasured and tended—so that the world will see not our wisdom, but Christ, the incarnate Wisdom of God.

A reality check: Deuteronomy might lead us to believe that if we do pass the test, the world will sit in wonder and amazement at our wisdom and discerning insight. That would be nice. And sometimes it happens. We see it in our work in MCC and MDS, in restorative justice and peacemaking, in our cultural, educational, professional, and economic successes. Mennonites, north and south of the border, are respected.

We are “humbly proud” of that, in that distinctively Mennonite way of mixing virtue with vice. We should indeed be truly grateful for successful and courageous witness, for creative transforming initiatives and experiments that catch on in the wider world. But God’s wisdom, incarnate in Jesus, met not with applause, but with deadly resistance. The Creator’s wisdom became flesh in a world that would finally nail it to the cross. The wisdom we are to practice is exactly that wisdom. We should rejoice when such wisdom is received, but we should not count on it, and never make public approval the measure of wisdom.

This call, summoning us in our desert, may then feel more perilous than promising. We know well, to use Paul’s words to the Corinthians, that “not many of [us are] wise by human standards, not many [...] powerful, not many [...] of noble birth.” Sometimes faith feels like a high-wire act without a wire. We’re often too timid to pursue peace, too tongue-tied to give voice to the gospel. We’re filled with shame at what happened when we did “occupy the land,” to use the phrase from Deuteronomy, whether we think of the appalling

treatment of First Nations or the terrible legacy of environmental degradation. We're confused about Jesus. Were he to ask us today, "And who do you say that I am?" we'd have a heated argument. We're not sure about church either, often suspicious that grand claims about the church, its identity and mission, are delusional. Enough said. This test scares us.

But remember, we are not the first to be at this crossroads. Israel has been here, Jesus was here, Paul and his little colonies were here, our forebears in the faith were here in the 16th century, and many times since.

We are not the first, but nor are we alone.

Remember? At the time of his own testing Jesus repeatedly placed himself in the midst of the people in their own time of testing.

Hebrews 2 captures this perfectly: "But we do see Jesus, the pioneer of our liberation, tested like us in every way." He "is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters." Quoting this time not from Deuteronomy but from Psalm 22, Jesus announces:

"I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

Jesus is here, now, in this congregation, as our brother and mentor. We have this evening been trying to catch a quick peek at how Jesus answered when he took the exam. It's not cheating. Jesus wants us to look. More, he's got plenty of teaching assistants, a whole "cloud of witnesses", as Hebrews calls them, past and present, who have passed the exam and can coach us. Look around you. They are sitting among us: there are those who can help us find the right words to speak good news, those who can show how to leave the safety of home and participate in Christ's peaceable mission in the world, still others who can show us how to care

for the Creator's handiwork. There are times when it's good to be "under a cloud."

On this evening the risen Lord is not so much above us as among us, in the midst of this congregation. He is not ashamed of us, but proudly announces in the words of Isaiah:

"Here am I and the children whom God has given me."

And on this night Jesus invites and welcomes us to his table, where he wishes to celebrate with us the covenantal tie that binds us to him and him to us.

I invite you to acknowledge his presence and welcome him. Please stand and join me in welcoming the One who has come in his Holy Spirit to stand with us. (Singing of HWB #25. Jesus, stand among us).

This is indeed a hallowed hour, a sacramental moment. Did you know that in Jesus and Paul's day "sacramentum" meant "oath of allegiance?" By joining him in at his table, we give our pledge of allegiance to the One who stands among us; we pledge ourselves to hoard neither bread nor word, but to offer them freely; we pledge ourselves not to stay at home, but to enter the world as witnesses to and practitioners of God's grace. As church and congregations we pledge ourselves anew to be colonies of the kingdom. We will commemorate this sacramental moment by joining it with an even older ritual of covenant-making by bringing stones and piling them up to mark this day when we said Yes to God, Yes to life.

So come—young and old, wise and foolish, strong and weak, rich and poor— come, bring your stones, in the sure confidence that God will take our stones and make them bread for a hungry world. Come receive the bread and the wine of the new covenant.