First Sunday of Lent All Saints’

February 14, 2016 Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Romans 10:8b-13

Psalm 91:1-2; 9-16 Luke 4:1-13

There is a notorious sinner in the community.

Imagine his acts: he cheats, enslaves, and abuses; he is corrupted by his own power, his own needs: he has hurt, abandoned, and manipulated people as means to his ends. So many casualties and pain lie in his wake.

But then something happens. Maybe he falls in love; maybe one child too many has cried under his hand; maybe he had a dream, visited by a warner of the night. Something has happened, and he sees his evil ways. He is overwhelmed by his guilt, overcome by grief, trapped in his own addictions, and he wants to change his ways, begin anew. He wants to be renewed, redeemed, and restored.

He goes to the village priest and asks, “What must I do?”

“Confess and receive absolution.”

“I already did that. It’s not enough. I’ve committed too many egregious sins. I’ve been too evil.”

“Hmm,” says the wise priest. “Do this: get the heaviest backpack you can, weigh it down with large stones. We are going to go climb a mountain. I’m going to make sure you suffer in horrible ways for all that you’ve done. Meet me at the base of the mountain at 5:00 am.

The notorious sinner arrives the next morning, burdened by a backpack he can barely sustain.

The priest straps a feather pillow on top of the backpack, and they begin to climb. The trip is horrific; the man all bloodied and beat up, almost beyond recognition, arrives at the top of the mountain with the priest.

“Now what?” as he slumps to his knees.

The priest takes the pillow, rips it open with his knife, and the feathers, caught in the winds of the mountain, fly away, and he turns to the man and says, “Gather up all the feathers.”

“But I can’t! That’s impossible!”

“Exactly- your evil acts can never be erased; they are indelible marks on the face of the earth forever. There is no wishing/washing them away. There is no amount of suffering on your part that will eradicate the evil you have perpetrated. All you are left with is the saving grace of Jesus. Hand it all over to Jesus. He’s already forgiven you. You’re no longer a prisoner defined by your acts, but a new creation in Christ.”

And with that the man falls to the ground, sobbing.

And then the priest with the sign of the cross says, “Go- love as Jesus loves you; forgive as Jesus forgives you; know that you are precious in God’s sight.” And with that, the priest unstraps the backpack weighed down with stones and throws it over the cliff.

This is what Paul means when he says, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Or as Fanny Crosby would write in one of her hymns, a woman, blinded in infancy who would write over 8,000 hymns, whose life we celebrated this week in the church calendar:

“Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine… perfect submission, perfect delight. This is my story; this is my song.”

This is salvation. This salvation does not begin with the crucifixion and resurrection; it starts right here in the story of Jesus’ temptation.

Most often we interpret this story as Jesus, as an individual, much like us, taking on the devil, the tempter, Satan, evil incarnate, and winning this spiritual boxing match in the ring of the desert.

Jesus, armed with his spiritual prowess and his Scripture, shuts down the devil in a 1-2-3 knockout punch.

And then we, when tempted, are to try and emulate Jesus’ example set forth in this story.

Good luck with that!

First of all, Jesus may have just a little bit of an edge on us in the temptation department. Is Jesus really tempted in the same way we are? He seems to struggle not even for a nano-second before he comes back to the devil. I don’t see any struggle. Jesus is set in his ways to win. Also, I don’t think the Holy Spirit took Jesus out into the desert with the chance that Jesus was going to lose his battle. The Holy Spirit is not a trickster or a gambler.

This story isn’t about an individual winning. Something else is going on.

Jesus, as the Christ, from the beginning of all time and all creation, is standing up, in our stead, on our behalf, for us, in the face of evil and defeating evil forever.

We are not meant to emulate (and invariably fail). This is not a story of “follow my example.” This is not a prescription of what we are supposed to do. Rather, it is a description of Jesus’ saving act.

We are meant to receive the gift, as a source of salvation: Jesus defeated Satan.

What does that mean: defeated Satan? Evil still exists in the world. So why is this salvific?

Think of our notorious man.

When Jesus says, “Love the Lord with all your heart (the seat of the intellect, the power to choose); all your soul (passion, the life force of Yes); and with all your might (our will, our acts, our power), you can trust in it.

If we enter into Jesus’ love and grace for us, knowing we are saved, knowing evil is destroyed, knowing that Jesus, in our stead, did battle with the devil and won, then we can trust in the depth of our soul, in our innermost being, and that in our deepest desire, therein lies the will of God.

Jesus won the battle. We can live with confidence and power and hope, just as Jonah did when he got up to read the passage from Deuteronomy this morning. With grace and strength he read the verses with power and conviction. And our notorious man can trust that Christ dwells within him, and now, renewed, redeemed and restored, he can be free to love and forgive. He can trust in his mind, his soul and his might.

Jesus won our battle for us, as well. He freely gives us the gift of life. And there is no greater gift than to trust in your very own heart as the seat of God’s will.

AMEN.