

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 1st Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019.

At our service this past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we noted that in Advent we wait, at Christmas we celebrate, and during Epiphany we share. Wait, celebrate and share. That's our job. That's our joy. Now we're in a new Season, the Season of Lent. Today we add a new verb to our list of things to do. And that new verb is to take stock of how well we are doing in our sharing of the Good News.

Part of taking stock is to acknowledge where we have done as expected and where we have not done as expected. The latter is called confession. It's an honest assessment. This assessment is followed by absolution, which is a reminder that God is a forgiving God and always provides new opportunities to meet expectations.

But let's also look at the former, those times when we have met expectations and taken pride in that obedience. We have studied what God wants us to do, and we have done a pretty good job of doing so. That's when we feel at our best. Success is always a better feeling than failure.

Well, if we have done a decent job at meeting expectations, can we build on that success? Is there a formula that we can follow? Can what worked well before work well again? As it turns out, our lessons this morning suggest such a formula.

The lesson from Deuteronomy (**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**) tells us what works. "When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that your God will choose as a dwelling for his name."

Notice these phrases: "You shall take" and "you shall put." It's a recipe provided by God. We don't have to invent a recipe. We merely have to follow the one God provides.

Later in the lesson, there is another phrase: "You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you ... shall

celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.”

The short version of this recipe is to acknowledge all the Lord’s blessings. Don’t let a day pass without doing so. If possible, start your day by giving thanks. It can be as simple as “Thank you, Lord, for this new day and the opportunities that I will have to do your will.” And then complete the circle by thanking the Lord at the end of the day. Something like, “Lord, I didn’t do everything that I should have done, but I did some of things, and I thank you for that opportunity.”

Our Psalm today (**Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16**) is a reminder that there is indeed a God on the receiving end of our daily prayer. “They – that would be you and I – shall call upon me, and I – that would be God – will answer them; I am with them in trouble; I will rescue them and bring them to honor. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.”

As we thank God for a new day, we need to remember that God indeed is listening and caring. In our recipe, we are reminded about basics. Something like “Don’t pick up a hot pan without a hot pad.” Yes, there really is a God who cares.

Now, let’s move on to the next lesson, the next step in the recipe. Here we find an interesting and controversial passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans (**Romans 10:8b-13**). Sometimes this passage is used to separate rather than bring together. The harshest interpretation is “If you don’t publicly confess that Jesus is the Son of God, you will not be saved.” A more generous interpretation – and in my mind closer to what God intends – is “How will you possibly benefit from God’s salvation if you don’t acknowledge it?”

The message for you and me is to include in our daily thank you to God an additional thank you for his Son Jesus who by his birth, life, death and resurrection rescues us from our own inadequate devices.

So, now we have “Thank you, Lord, for this new day, and especially for your Son Jesus.” Something we can say at the beginning and end of the day. But we’re not done. There is one more lesson to consider: the baptism of Jesus and his visit to the wilderness and his conversation with the Devil (**Luke 4:1-13**).

Our lessons suggest a very simple and doable daily Lenten discipline. Thank God at the beginning of each day for new opportunities and at the end of each day for His Son Jesus, whose victory over death gives us hope and assurance. The challenge is that, as simple and doable as this discipline sounds, it can be tough to execute. Not because it is beyond our ability, but because other things can distract us. Our Collect today uses the phrase “assaulted by manifold temptations.”

In the wilderness, the distraction for Jesus is the Devil himself. The Devil is the personification of all that gets in the way of you and me trying to do the right thing. Look at the Devil’s techniques. There are bribes, big ones. “To you I will give all the kingdoms of the world if you just worship me.” And there are dares. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple. If you are such a big-shot, prove it.”

Jesus looks at these distractions and says to the Devil, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” At which point, the Devil leaves Jesus alone – but only for awhile. He’ll be back, just as you and I face distractions every day.

As a practical matter, the more robust our Lenten discipline, the bigger the possibility of distraction. In our eagerness to be more responsible, we perhaps set ourselves up for disappointment, if not failure. So, let’s start at a more reasonable level.

Let’s thank God for new opportunities at the start of each day, and, at the end of each day, let’s review with God how we used those opportunities. These conversations can be a single sentence, maybe spoken into a mirror, just to underscore ownership. And, if we miss a day or a morning or an evening, let’s not miss the next day or morning or evening.

The point is to employ a simple device as a means of taking stock. How well did we wait, how well did we celebrate, how well did we share, how well can we keep the Lord front and center in our lives, including how well can we keep the distractions at bay? In short, how well can we say thank you?

Now, if a simple “thank you” twice-a-day recipe seems either underwhelming or overwhelming, here’s another suggestion. If you have access to a hymnal, pick a

hymn and ponder the lyrics. You don't have to sing. Just read. For example, in our final hymn today – Come down, O Love divine – is this phrase: “For none can guess its grace, till Love create a place wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.”

That's what we want to do this Season of Lent: make a dwelling, create some space, for the Holy Spirit. We won't be disappointed. The Spirit is hungry for a home. We need to be hungry too.

Amen.