

Full to the Brim: Even in the Desert

March 6, 2022 – First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Cader Howard

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

Last week on Ash Wednesday, we began the season of Lent—a 40-day period of time during which we are supposed to prepare for Easter, an annual time for examining ourselves and emptying ourselves. What’s the most common question you hear? What are you giving up for Lent? It’s a modified version of fasting or denying oneself, although many people today use it to jumpstart healthy lifestyle changes. Once again, I am giving up Facebook for Lent. Last time it lasted two years, but we’ll see how well I do this time.

Lenten worship can be experienced by some as somber or even melancholy. There’s even tradition that we don’t sing the word “alleluia” in Lent or use it in our liturgy because it might be too joyful. It’s known as “burying” or “hiding the alleluia” so that it can then be resurrected at Easter. We don’t follow this strictly, but it’s true that our regular Lenten music or liturgy doesn’t usually contain alleluias or expressions of great joy. I think I’ve already said the word too many times this morning, and I hope I haven’t accidentally increased your level of joy. If you’re nervous that you’ll accidentally sing the word alleluia during Lent, don’t worry. We operate on a 30 second delay so that the AV crew can bleep out any alleluias before we broadcast them...

This year, instead of emptying yourself or denying yourself, I’d like to invite you into a different observance of Lent. Our theme, “Full to the Brim,” is meant to evoke an image of abundance, of a cup filled so high that it’s even spilling over. I can imagine 10-year-old me getting to fill up a large cup by myself at a self-serve drink dispenser in a restaurant—and letting it get all the way to the edge, and walking (SO) slowly and deliberately back to the table trying not to spill a drop...taking small sips along the way. This is still how I fill my iced tea.

Full to the Brim—it’s about recognizing that our cups are already overflowing with God’s grace. It’s also about taking stock of our lives and dreaming about how they might be different—imagining what it would be like if we let our cups be filled to the brim with joy, with relationships, with beauty, with nature, with meaning and purpose. Imagine what your life could be like if you let it be filled to the brim, so that your life is so full that it is overflowing into the lives of others... and people are around you are getting splashed with joy and kindness and compassion. Full to the Brim is an invitation to an expansive Lent, not a reductive Lent. It’s an invitation to expansive living. What is expansive living? Rev. Sarah Speed defines it as “a life that reflects the fullness that comes from right relationships with God, yourself, and others.” She says, “This will look different for everyone, but might be marked by awe and gratitude, a sense of self-worth rooted in God’s love, meaning and purpose in one’s life, loving relationships, and joy that comes from using your God-given gifts.”ⁱ

I’ve included a worksheet in the bulletin—and it’s also linked in the emails you received a Wednesday and Saturday. The worksheet is called A REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT TOOL for Expansive Living. It invites us to take stock of our lives in different areas and then imagine what a more expansive life would look like. It’s an invitation to let our cups be filled to the Brim with things that bring us wholeness and health and joy.

Our two scripture readings are in dialogue with each other. Although set a thousand years apart, they both describe being stranded in the desert. And they both remind us that we can be assured of God’s abundant provision, even in the desert wilderness. Our first reading includes instructions to the Hebrews about how they should honor God after finally getting settled in the promised land and harvesting from the land. Our memories can be so short—so this passage has them recite their own history of being provided for by God so that they remember who it was that

kept them alive in the desert. It begins with the line “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” and then recites the broad story of God’s people being freed from slavery in Egypt and given new land where they could thrive. Each time they harvest their crops, the Hebrews are instructed to dedicate their first fruits—the very first basket or gathering—to God in recognition of all that God did to save them and provide for them. This ritual reminds them year after year who it was that delivered them. Our memories are short—it’s easy for any of us to forget all the people who walked with us on our journeys, who stood with us in difficult times, who gave us opportunities and second and third chances along the way. None of us got to where we are alone, none of us are self-made. All of us got here with assistance along the way and especially with a full cup of grace poured out into our lives.

In our second reading, Jesus is led by the Spirit out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Just so you know, I don’t read this as historical. As I’ve said before, 90% of what our culture says about the devil comes from Dante and not scripture. And in this story, the character of the devil seems to be closer to a driving exam instructor with a clipboard than any kind of scary demon. Let’s see—you didn’t turn the stones into bread, claim ultimate power, or test God...you also came to a full stop at light, parallel parked, and always checked your blind spots. Okay--you pass.

In this story, Jesus is also in the desert wilderness like the Hebrews. The devil tests him to see if he will use his own power to benefit himself. Instead, Jesus resists the temptation. He remembers who is and who is called to serve. He trusts that God’s provision of grace will be enough for him. The Devil essentially invites him to fill his cup with power and wealth instead of with meaning and purpose. Jesus resists and chooses for his cup to be filled with love. He confirms that he will live for God and for other people rather than simply for himself.

What’s interesting to me is how many people today fail this same test—who, when presented with power, claim it for themselves and their own enrichment. And who then spend the rest of their lives gathering and hoarding. Our second reading asks this question of us: what will we fill our cup with? What do we want? Is it a life full of power, control, and wealth? Is it to be constantly trying to scrape up more for ourselves and constantly living in fear that someone will take it from us? Or will we resist and choose, instead, to fill our cups with love, with meaning and purpose, with relationships, and joy, and beauty? Will we choose an expansive life?

I’m not claiming this is an easy choice or an easy task. It’s easy to look at our own lives and focus on the scarcity, on what’s broken or missing. But this Lenten season, I hope we will start with what’s right, what’s good and wholesome. Start with the incredible grace and love that God has poured into your life. And take stock of all the good things in your life—relationships, joys, opportunities for growth, opportunities to take in the beauty of God’s creation, opportunities to serve others and help them heal or grow or flourish. And then spend time imagining what your life could be if you filled it with more of these life-giving things. How can your life be more expansive? What do you want your life to be full of? What do you want your heart to be full of? How about your children’s hearts? How about your neighbors hearts? How can your cup overflow into the lives of others?

This Lenten Season, do not banish the alleluias from your life. Keep joy front and center as you remember that *God’s got you!* You are safe and loved, and God continuously pours grace into your cup. Even in the wilderness moments of your life, God is there with you, providing what you need. Even in the desert, we are Full to the Brim. Amen.

ⁱ From A Sanctified Art, Full to the Brim: A REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT TOOL for Expansive Living by Rev. Sarah A. Speed