

Journey through Lent

March 9, 2025 • 1st Sunday of Lent • Year C

"Now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." —Deut. 26:10

OPENING PRAYER

Reader: We come together as the people of God.

All: **Lord, be with us as we begin our Lenten journey.**

Reader: We come together as followers of Christ.

All: **Lord, be with us as we begin our Lenten journey.**

Reader: We come together led by the Holy Spirit.

All: **May the scripture readings and our conversation this week enable us to be more faithful disciples. Amen.**

SHARING

As we begin this 40-day season leading up to Easter, you might think of it as a 40-day retreat. This is time to reflect on your past year, and turn back to God in areas where that is needed.

- 1 How do you feel as Lent begins? Are you looking forward to it or do you dread it for some reason? Please share.
- 2 Do you have any particular thoughts or hopes for how you would like to observe Lent this year?

LISTENING: DEUTERONOMY 26:4-10

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God.

This reading is one among many with a "first fruits" theme in the Old Testament. Many Christians aren't familiar with the phrase "first fruits" or its connection to tithing, but most practicing Jews are. Moses instructs the people to give gifts of thanksgiving to God in response to all that God has done for them. Not only should they offer gifts, but Moses is very particular that they should offer *"the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."* This model of giving "off the top" is the basis of a "first fruits" way of life. Moses reminds the Israelites they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and led through the wilderness. Now that they have settled in a fertile land of their own, he teaches that they should offer the first grapes of their harvest, the first figs from their tree, or the firstborn goat or sheep of the spring. It even extended to offering their firstborn child back to God, although they weren't expected to perform child sacrifice like some of the peoples who lived in the surrounding area. Instead, parents sacrificed a lamb or two birds in the child's place. (That is what Mary and Joseph did the first time they took Jesus to the Temple.)

From a contemporary viewpoint, first fruits giving means *intentionally* giving of your time, talent, and treasure in thanksgiving for how much God has gifted you. It might mean literally giving the first fruits from your garden to a food bank or buying school supplies for a child in need when you buy them for your children. It might mean offering your guest bedroom as a place of hospitality for others, putting your car to good use by driving an elderly neighbor to doctor appointments, or volunteering to coach a local soccer team. However you give of yourself, the point of first fruits giving is for it to be a priority in your life, not an after-thought.

A more significant challenge is to practice first fruits giving with your income. It means making charitable donations from your paycheck first—before you pay for everything else you need or want. This ensures that God doesn't get put in last place "if there is something left over." Practically, it means that you intentionally decide ahead of time how much you will donate from your income rather than giving some money away if you have extra at the end of the week, month, or year. In deciding who to donate to, you might tithe some money to your parish and some to other organizations that are working for charity and justice causes.

SHARING

- 1 Share about an area of your life where you give of your time, talent, and treasure. Why do you choose to do it?
- 2 Who do you know who embodies generosity in a way that inspires you?
- 3 What is difficult for you to share or “give back” to God and others? How might this scripture be challenging you to reconsider your giving habits? Please share.



REFLECTION: LUKE 4:1-4

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

The story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert echoes the Israelites 40 years of wandering in the desert. God had led them out of slavery in Egypt and they were on their way to the Promised Land, but the journey ended up being much longer and harder than they had imagined. They were famished a lot those years. Sometimes they were literally in danger of starving or dying of dehydration until God fed them with manna and gave them water from a rock.

Jesus, on the other hand, fasted in the desert by choice, so this story has become the foundation of our Lenten fasting. What do you think was his reason for fasting? To remind himself how dependent he was on God? To be in solidarity with those who are hungry but not by choice? Whatever reason you imagine Jesus fasted, we get the opportunity to embrace a fasting discipline too during this season. Many world religions have an element of fasting in them, a time of self-purification, introspection, and solidarity with others. Billions of people throughout history have voluntarily fasted with the hope of some good coming of it. Now is our chance to join them in this ancient spiritual discipline.

SHARING

- 1 What reasons were you taught for fasting during Lent? Are those still the reasons you fast?
- 2 What good has come from your fasting (from food, drink, criticism, shopping, single-use plastic, etc.) in the past?
- 3 What actions are you committing to this Lent, particularly in the areas of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?



CLOSING PRAYER

Reader: Lord God, teach us your paths.

All: **Help us to make a good beginning to Lent.**

May we use this time to grow closer to you and remember our dependence on you.

Reader: We ask this in Jesus' name.

All: **Amen.**

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