“Our One and Only” A sermon based on Psalm 91:1-2;9-16 Romans 10:8b-13 and Luke 4:1-13 delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on the First Sunday in Lent, March 9, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

(Our Theme throughout Lent will be the Lord’s Prayer. Today we explore the opening words: “Our Father . . .”)

If you have ever questioned the importance of the Hebrew scriptures as a foundation for the Christian witness, look no further than this morning’s lectionary readings. Everybody is quoting from them! And I mean, everybody, including and most significantly and chilling of all, the devil. I guess the devil really is in the details! Quotes from the prophets Isaiah and Joel, the Psalms and especially from the last book in the Torah, Deuteronomy, are peppered throughout these readings.

Most of the quotes are from Deuteronomy, which is no surprise, as it acts as a sort of summary and reminder of all the books that came before it in the Torah. In Deuteronomy we hear the “second giving of the Law,” which is what the word Deuteronomy actually means. Israel had lost a whole generation of folks while wandering in the wilderness and now this new generation settled in the “promised land” needed to hear the history and the Law of Moses all over again as they moved into a time of judges and kings. Monotheism, faith in the “one and only” God, had to be reestablished as a solid principle in order to hold in check the power of the monarchy to come.

Out of these history-filled and story-filled 34 chapters, there emerges a core, a center to it all. This core is called in Hebrew the *Shema.* You may remember from our Revitalization process how important the *Shema* is. It is the introduction to and cornerstone of every act of worship in synagogues and temples. *Shema* means “hear” in Hebrew. So, the beginning of the core quote is this: *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”*  One of my dearest pastor friends, who died tragically in a bicycle accident, had a Vermont vanity license plate that very simply said “Echad.” The oneness of God was his core principle, and he proudly displayed it on his car along with a “Vermont Strong” plate. It was a good conversation starter, too, because everyone wanted to know who E-CHAD was!

The devil thought he could trip-up Jesus by quoting from scripture. Famously he uses our Psalm for the day, Psalm 91, word for word to try to get Jesus to jump from the pinnacle. In Luke 4:10 and 11, the devil says, “For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” (Psalm 91:11-12) And Jesus answers, predictably now, as he has already quoted three other times from this same book of the Torah. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:16: which says: “It is said, ‘Don’t put the Lord your God to the test.’” That served to close the discussion!

Earlier in the temptation narrative. in answer to the big lie that the devil proffers about having been given authority over all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus again very simply quotes Deuteronomy 6:13 to end the discussion, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Serve the “one and only” God, Jesus commands us.

Paul also likes to quote scripture. In contrast to the devil, however, he is seeking to enrich the spiritual lives of the mostly Gentile church in Rome and to bolster his conviction that the unifying word of God in the Torah has found its fulfillment in the life and death of Jesus, the Messiah. In Romans 10:8b, where we begin our lectionary reading for today, Paul also quotes from Deuteronomy. He writes, “**8**But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.” A better summary of Deuteronomy 30:14 would be hard to find. But it doesn’t stop there. In making his point, Psul also quotes from Isaiah and Joel in these short four and a half verses. So, what is this word that is in our mouths and in our hearts? It is as Isaiah 28:16 reminds us that “No one who believes in him will be put to shame,” and it is the fact that “the same Lord is Lord of all” (v. 12c) and as Joel 2:32 reminds us it is that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (v. 13) Hear, O Romans, the Lord is your God, and the Lord is one, Paul is saying!

When Jesus teaches us how to pray, he also wants us to embrace these truths about God. The opening words of the Lord’s Prayer seem simple, but in their simplicity, they are rich with meaning. In the Gospel of Matthew, which we read on Ash Wednesday, it is recorded that right after Jesus talks about hypocrites, he says:

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.. . .’”

This is not just **any** father. This is a father who knows what you need before you ask. This is not just **my** father, or **your** father, but **“Our”** father—a possessive term

of inclusivity that we dare not ignore. This is a father who later in the Gospel of Matthew self-describes as “a mother hen (who) gathers her chickens under her wings.” (Matthew 23:37) This God is the same one who is described by the prophet Hosea as the one who taught Ephriam to walk, took children in their arms to heal them, who “led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.” Who was to children “like those who lift infants to their cheeks” and who leans down to feed them. (Hosea 11:3-4) This is a father who exhibits all there is to parental loving-kindness all rolled into one glorious package. This is a father with all the attributes of both earthly parents like how Christian author, Philip Gulley, describes his parents in his book Porch Talk: Stories of Decency, Common Sense, and Other Endangered Species (pp. 68-69):

Here are some things I’m just now starting to appreciate:

I’m grateful my father warned me against arrogance.

I meet adults who think they are big shots and they are

insufferable.

I’m grateful my mother taught me to question religious

claims. A lot of damage is done when we invest religious leaders

with great power. A little skepticism in matters religious never

hurts. Ditto for politics.

I’m grateful my parents taught me to measure people for

how they treated those who served them. Beware of people who

treat waiters and waitresses poorly, They’ll treat you that way

too.

I'm grateful my parents urged me to get a paper route when I

was eleven. The job taught me responsibility and not to despise the

poor, who were usually more generous with their tips than my

wealthy customers.

I’m grateful my parents had me. I once told them I didn’t

ask to be born, but now I’m glad they didn’t wait for my permission.

Life has its difficult moments, but it also holds deep joys, such

as springtime and children and the day after Christmas.

The father we call out to in the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer is a father in the context of the culture of the ancient near east, who is the “One Lord” described in the *Shema.* The “One Lord” described in Isaiah 28:16*,* in Joel 2:32 and in Psalm 91. This heavenly being, Our Creator, is the one who shelters us and who commands the angels to protect us (vv. 1-12). This is indeed is Our “one and only” God! Amen.

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