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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
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Lent 1 – Year C
Deut. 26.1-11
Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16
Romans 10.8b-13
Luke 4.1-13

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago, in my former parish, we tried an experiential Ash Wednesday service with the hope of attracting more children and youth to come to church that day to begin the holy season of Lent. During that liturgy, as people came forward to receive the imposition of ashes, having a priest trace the sign of the cross in ash on their foreheads, they were invited to take a stone from a basket in the aisle. After the prayers, we heard stories of our salvation history – how Moses led the people of Israel through the dried waters of the Red Sea into the wilderness desert; how the people complained in the wilderness that they were hungry, and God sent them manna from heaven to eat; how the people complained in the wilderness desert that they were thirsty, and God instructed Moses to strike the stone at Meribah with his staff, and water poured forth. That stone at Meribah became a source of water in a barren and thirsty wilderness.

We then heard how Joshua led the people of Israel out of the wilderness through the waters of the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. As had happened before, swollen waters dried up under the hand of God and the people of Israel crossed safely. Joshua ordered them to gather twelve stones from the Jordan over which they had crossed, and they did, carrying them until they made camp at Gilgal. Those stones across the Jordan became the pathway to the Promised Land.

We know that Jesus compared himself to the stone that the builders rejected, which would later become the cornerstone holding all things together. Jesus warned the officials in the temple that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. When the officials heard this, they wanted to kill him right there but they didn't because they feared the crowds. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.

On that Ash Wednesday evening several years ago, we were instructed to hold the stone that we had picked up on our way to receive our cross of ash, to feel our stone, to look at our stone, to examine our stone. We noticed that it was hard. We noticed that it was rough in some places. We noticed that it was smooth in other places. We know that stones can hurt. We know that stones can kill. We know that stones can cause us to stumble. We know that stones are a place where we can lay our head if we have nothing else.

We were then told to think about the things we had done that past week that we wish we hadn't, the things we didn't do that past week that we wish we had done. We were invited to lift those burdens, our sins, off our hearts and lay them on the stone we were holding, and let the stone carry them. That stone became a confessing stone – the stone that is the source of Living Water, the stone that is our pathway to the Promised Land, the stone that is Jesus who has become the cornerstone for us.

After we confessed our sins, the children in the congregation collected all the stones from everyone and carried them and placed them in the baptismal font in the middle of the aisle of the church. One child poured water over the stones, symbolically

washing our sins away, while the priest pronounced the absolution assuring that God forgave us.

We will hear a lot about stones during this season of Lent, this forty day period of self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; reading and meditating on God's holy Word; in which we prepare ourselves to face once again the mystery of why Jesus would be crucified, die, and rise again for us.

As a way to experience Lent here at Holy Faith this year, Mother Pam has prepared "Lent in a Bag," available in the back of the church, which especially children and their families are encouraged to take to mark the weeks of this Holy Season. Each bag contains six small items, including a stone, to be used as symbols to focus individual, family, or group meditations and conversations about Jesus and his sacrifice.

In today's Gospel reading for this first Sunday in Lent, we already hear about stones. After his baptism, and in preparation for the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he is tempted by the devil. After fasting for those forty days, Jesus is famished. In the first temptation, the devil challenges Jesus to show that he is the Son of God by commanding a stone to become a loaf of bread which Jesus could eat. But Jesus refuses. Would we refuse if we were famished? What are the stones in our life that provide no nourishment? What are the stones in our life that make us go hungry? Though Jesus resisted the temptation to transform stone into bread, he became known for feeding people who were hungry for food, or for love, or for a word of encouragement, or for simple acceptance. Might there be a stony place in our hearts that needs transforming – some attitude or habit that, with a little attention, might even become a gift for you and others?

In the final temptation in today's Gospel reading, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and challenges Jesus to show that he is the Son of God by throwing himself off the top of the temple and onto the pavement below. The devil tries to reassure Jesus by citing verses of the psalm: "He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." But Jesus refuses, and warns, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." How do we tempt the Lord our God? What are the stones in our life that hurt us? What are the stones in our life that cause us to stumble and strike our foot?

Before this season of Lent is over, we will hear of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a colt. The crowds will greet him waving palm branches and shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Some of the officials in the crowd will ask Jesus to order his disciples to stop, but Jesus will refuse, explaining that even if the crowds were silent, the stones would shout out, the stones would cry. Would we fall silent? What are the stones in our life that cause us to shout out? What are the stones in our life that cause us to cry?

Before this season of Lent is over, we will hear again that Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, but he has become the cornerstone. We will hear that everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls. When the officials in the temple hear this, they realize that Jesus is talking about them and they want to kill him. Will we recognize that Jesus is the cornerstone? What are the stones in our life that break us to pieces? What are the stones in our life that crush us?

Before this season of Lent is over, we have the opportunity – no, the privilege – of gathering up these stones in our life, placing them in the font of our heart, asking God to forgive us, and allowing God to wash us clean with God's mercy, forgiveness, and loving kindness. These stones that provide no nourishment. These stones that make us go hungry. These stones that hurt us. These stones that cause us to stumble. These stones that cause us to shout out. These stones that cause us to cry. These stones that break us to pieces. These stones that crush us.

God's mercy, forgiveness, and loving kindness can turn these stones into the source of Living Water, into the pathway to the Promised Land, into the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ. And it is God's same mercy, forgiveness, and loving kindness that rolled the stone away from Jesus' tomb on that first Easter Day, which will also roll the stone away from our tomb of sin and death, so that we can enter a new and unending life with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.