

## First Fruits

### First Sunday in Lent

#### Deuteronomy 26:1-11

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> 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 the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup> You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." <sup>4</sup> When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> 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; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> 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. "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

When I first read this scripture, several months ago, I thought it was about giving our tithes and offerings. Then I thought it was about worship. Then I thought it was about inclusivity. It is true Moses instructed the Israelites to give – especially for the building of the tabernacle and all its furnishings, but our passage is more about an attitude of gratitude; remembering those who went before us, remembering our past and learning from our past, a much bigger picture than what I had in mind. Our scripture is about a way of life – what it means to be the gracious and thankful people of God.

Our scripture is the climax of the exodus story. Imagine this: after thirty-nine years, eleven months, and one week in the wilderness, the Israelites were gathered on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land. After nearly forty years of feeling lost and unsure, having had to learn a mountain of laws and rules, after being chastised for bad behavior (often well deservedly!), and after having spent a good deal of their sojourn

being confused, underfed, and poorly housed—wondering why in the world they left Egypt in the first place—there they sat on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley, the promised land lying in the distance! Everything they have endured, worked, and sacrificed for was at long last within their reach. The sense of God's grace and blessing in return for their faithfulness must have been overwhelming!

Even before the people set foot in the Promised Land Moses gave instructions for a celebration of thanksgiving. There was to be the giving of the first fruit of the harvest and then a recitation of the story of deliverance. These were inseparable, suggesting that the meaning of the one (thanksgiving) frames the meaning of the other (recitation of God's acts of liberation).

Our scripture describes a worshipful act that is confessional and about praise to God, full of individual affirmation and corporate memory. It is an act of gratitude for God's particular grace that ends in a celebration whose embrace extends beyond Israel's own life ("the aliens who reside among you," [v. 11](#)). It describes a moment that is rooted in memory ("A wandering Aramean was my ancestor," [v. 5](#)), shaped by a journey ("The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand," [v. 8](#)), and defined by joy ("shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you," [v. 11](#)). In rehearsing this story and affirming that *today* a declaration is made—"I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us" ([v. 3](#))—the participants became worshipers. We confess that the faithfulness of God to Israel is the basis of our own life, the provision by which we may now voice our own gratitude and even claim this story as our own. As George Herbert noted in his poem about Israel's struggles in entering the promised land, "their story pens and sets us down," that is, their story reads those who remember and retell it, marking us by the same journey and shaping us by the same faithfulness.

The Greeks believed that the goddess of memory (*Mnēmosynē*) was the mother of imagination. For Israel, memory was more often the mother of faith, the way God's

promises were rehearsed and named and claimed anew. To remember like that was not simply to rummage through archival or antiquarian documents, much less to preserve the past in some academic tome. The genealogies and stories ("A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...") identified Israel as belonging to the God who, in Calvin's words, "never forsakes his people in the middle of the journey" and whose grace makes of such memories the stuff on which faith feeds.

In any case, this journey marks us as people of a particular way. The church dares to confess its faith, because on this journey the church believes that God has drawn near to us, spoken to us, even made provision for us out of the abundance of God's own life. Like a love letter, we do not hunt up an excuse for professing our love or expressing our gratitude. Rather, we speaking the foolishness of love because we are convinced we have heard the language of love in God's passion and compassion for God's people. Remaining silent—or worse, conjuring up reasons to chatter among ourselves—is a sign of deafness, a sign that in seeking to avoid this word of love we have become captive to some deep and terrible power. The church confesses its faith by confessing that it has been loved, and thus has been liberated from self-absorption into the freedom of life as God's gift—the freedom to welcome "the aliens who reside" in our midst as gifts, the freedom to *know* God on the basis of God's extravagant, unwarranted, ever-surprising self-giving.

So what are we to learn from this scripture for our daily lives? First, we are to experience and express gratitude. Have you ever known people who seldom say, "Thank you," or express a sense of gratitude for the things done for or given to them? Some live as if they are entitled to the goodwill of others. We are to remember the unmerited good that has come our way and to repent of the wrongs we have done. In this way we express gratitude by opening our lives to examination, purification, and correction. We express gratitude by seeking to live in right relationship with God, world, and self. Developing and expressing the attitude of gratitude, then, can become a spiritual discipline.

Second, we are to remember the ancestors. In this text, the ancestors are the particular individuals who stood out as exemplary figures for the people. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..." We can recall those who have gone before us. These may be treasured friends, beloved relatives, or others who left their imprints on our lives and the life of the community. Our gratitude extends to them because through their faith they still speak and encourage us to work for a better world. We are challenged to remember global oppressions and the ancestors who resisted them. The work of our ancestors is furthered through our faithful efforts.

Third, we are to remember the past. The past represents the events that shaped us directly and indirectly, in recognized and unrecognized ways. We must struggle to remember the past so that we can learn the lessons of history and move toward a future with a greater sense of wisdom and appreciation of past struggles. When we ignore the past or fail to learn the lessons of history, then we are likely to repeat past tragedies on a different scale. When we do not learn from the past, the future becomes the past revisited.

Celebration and recitation can be powerful symbols of and witness to what God has done in our midst. We may gather to give thanks and confess past wrongs of commission and omission, to acknowledge personal and collective participation in the wider dramas of life, and to seek to amend our ways. **Archie Smith Jr.**

So what is one to say about all of this—that the journey of these Lenten weeks means that we really are invited to think long and hard about our story; that we are to practice some daily or weekly disciplines to keep that story ever fresh; that we are to work harder to be more sincere Christians; that we are to give more, practice more effective self-restraint? Is that the journey this text describes and to which this season of Lent beckons us? Or is this text really about the celebration of God's abundance—to wandering Arameans and other confused types; to folk who live in a strange land and find themselves oppressed by hard taskmasters; to folk who feel trapped in impossible situations yet find themselves, surprisingly, delivered; to folk who are struggling clumsily

to say thank you with their lives? The provisions of our God who never abandons us on the journey are, according to this text, bountiful (v. 11). That is why it is so important for the church, especially in this season of Lent, to undertake, above all, our task of praise and celebration. This story in Deuteronomy ends in celebration and praise. Our worship, in its purest sense, is a way of offering praise to the One who will not let even death silence God's love for this world.

Of course, we do not *have* to celebrate. We often think there are more important things to do. However what if we are set free to celebrate, what if we are set free to offer thanksgiving, what if "this bounteous God" really is near us, offering joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us, keeping us in God's grace and guiding us when perplexed, freeing us from all ills in this world and the next? Not to praise and give thanks in the company of this God would be to fail miserably in understanding where this season of Lent seeks to take us. It would be to starve ourselves on our own sufficiencies, rather than taste the banquet that has been prepared. Why not, rather, offer to God our thanks? Why not sit and eat? **Thomas W. Currie and Nick Carter**

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