

‘In Remembrance’

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 21, 2010

First Sunday of Lent

Luke 4:1-13

Rev. John Wahl

Deuteronomy 26:1-9

At my house is an old wooden trunk that came to me after my grandmother passed away. It once held the sum total of my great-grandmother’s possessions she brought to the United States in her first and only journey from Switzerland. Everything she had to begin her new life in a new country fit into this one oversized suitcase. She arrived here not with a whole lot of stuff, but with many memories of her homeland and dreams about her future in a new country. The new land upon which she lived and the fruits that she went on to produce – she believed – belonged not to her, but came as a gift from God.

This section of Deuteronomy offers instructions pertaining to the ancient act of remembrance. The Exodus story (which was about a people on the move) had – through many generations – been remembered within the people through its repetition in their sacred writings. Now, a new event in their history, the harvest, would give them a new role within the story of God’s mighty acts. God had brought them safely through their long journey, and now they were no longer a people on the move. As a formerly wandering and soon-to-be settled people, their identity as the children of God would change.

The first action which is prescribed is the giving of an offering. The text instructs the owners and farmers of the land to return to a portion of their harvest as an offering of thanks to God. These *first fruits* were to be handed over to one of the priests of the Temple: a member of the Levites; the one tribe of the twelve that would own no land of their own. It was the duty of the priests, then, to consecrate the offering and put it to use in accordance to God’s will.

This might seem to us like a cumbersome way of giving offerings. In many of the near-Eastern pagan religions, harvest offerings were common, but rarely would those who owned land be required to pass their offerings through the hands of some landless intermediary. Typically, offerings were given with as much fanfare as possible so that the giver on earth would be noticed by the gods in heaven. All of the ram’s blood and burnt flesh were meant to make a big show out of giving.¹

¹ *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 2

The emerging problem of Deuteronomy is not how to worship God in a strange land but how to worship God in a land of abundance. The Promised Land – described as the land flowing with milk and honey – could become a dangerous place; and not because of enemies beyond the border, but because of the wealth and world goods that flow from the land itself. Over time, God’s Promised Land might become just ordinary land: no longer a sign of their dependence upon God; just a place to live and prosper.

Up until this point, the people of Israel were wanderers without a land of their own; they were people who lived in tents. Now, they were at the moment when they are about to possess their own land: a necessary prerequisite for any offering of *first fruits*. Being settled in one place will re-define the people of God; they will now fend for themselves and produce for themselves and yet, they must still remember that God was their creator and provider.

Verse five – which references the ancient Hebrew ancestry of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – is usually translated as “a wandering Aramean was my father.” And yet, this term for wandering can be translated two ways. It can refer to the nomadic ways of the Patriarchs, but it also implies peril; that a wandering people was often also a “perishing” people.

This confession of the ancient history of the Israelite people begins with the admission that they come from a family that almost didn’t make it. At several points along the way, the people of God teetered on the brink of distinction. Abraham was almost one-hundred years old and had no children. His son Isaac was nearly sacrificed in a test of Abraham’s faith. Jacob had to fight for his life against an angel in the night. Joseph was sold by his brothers to passers-by. Then, generations later, when the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, God heard their cry and released them from their captors.

This day, the first Sunday of Lent, begins our annual journey toward the cross and beyond to the miracle of Easter. This is, for members of the church community, not a blind journey – because we already know its destination. Still, we are asked to make the conscious choice of traveling with fellow believers on a sometimes unpleasant and bumpy road. Along the way, we will see Jesus being betrayed, accused, humiliated, abandoned and tormented. It is not an easy thing to watch as we realize that we might well have responded in the same way as our ancient ancestors. And yet, we still undertake this Lenten journey because of our thanks to God who offered his own *first fruits* on our behalf – giving his Son so that we might have life.

Lent provides opportunities for individuals in faith communities to gather together and remember our collective history.² We still claim to be heirs of those wandering Arameans who made their long and perilous journey toward the Promised Land. We also claim to be willing followers of Jesus who make the dangerous and tragic journey with him to the cross in Jerusalem. At the same time, we claim our heritage as settled people: members of the church that has been built to re-create the Body of Christ on earth; those who gather together to offer our thanksgiving to the Lord and then go out into the world to reveal the truth of God's steadfast love.

Almost ten years ago, the church where I worked sponsored four young men who were refugees from Sudan. They were among thousands of children that have been called "walking boys," who had been orphaned during their Civil War and eventually found their way – after years or months of walking hundreds of miles to a refugee camp in a neighboring country.

Then, after coming to the United States, the boys – who were now young men – were given an apartment and, through the care and generosity of many in the church, a chance at a new life in Kentucky. There were many obvious and unexpected adjustments they had to make: English was not their first language; they had never shopped in a grocery or used a vacuum cleaner. I know it was not easy for them; they were a wandering people who were now trying to settle themselves in a new and very different place.

After a year, they all had secured jobs; they were working toward their GEDs and had dreams of going to college. One had gotten a driver's license and the four had pooled their money to purchase a car together. As a church, we felt, of course, that we were the ones who had been blessed, that we had learned much more from them than they had from us. Their deeply-held sense of thanksgiving was an inspiration for us all. But, on the first anniversary of their arrival, the boys wanted to give something back to the church that had so embraced them, but also as an offering of thanksgiving to God.

They chose as their *first fruits* the song that we will sing later on this service. At the camp, they had all become Christians and worshipped with an Episcopal priest who taught them about the love of God and the mercy of Christ. They had come to see that during their walking, God had been protecting them; and that during their journey to this new and strange land, Christ had been with them. *Siyahamba*, they sang as they danced for God and the congregation that morning, *we are walking, for the Lord is our light*.

² Archie Smith in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

Even as settled people – members of the Body of Christ that has been in ministry here in this place for over fifty years – we also walk in the light of the Lord. We are heirs to an incredible story of release and redemption on which God been leading us for many generations. We have been given a land that is fruitful and opportunities to create a bountiful harvest. And so, we are called to offer our *first fruits* – that which has been most important in our lives – back to God.

This morning, as we ordain and install new leaders for this congregation, let us be in remembrance of all that God has done for us in the past, the ways the God continues to lead us in the present, and how God will guide us into the future. We have joined Christ on his journey, accepting our role as faithful followers, even if the road ahead is sometimes fraught with peril. But, we know the end of the story: a story that reveals God's love for us in resurrection and new life. And, consistent with the story is what we have been taught to remember by our ancestors: that God hears the cry of those who are in need and leads them to a land a promise. God is ever ready to deliver us from our personal and communal restraints and give us resources beyond measure. So, let us give thanks to the God who was and is and will always be with us. AMEN.