

“WE WILL REMEMBER”

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1st Sunday in Lent

Finish this sentence in your mind: “I worship the Lord best by...” Did you finish that sentence with something like “...by singing”, or “...by praying”, or “...by telling others about Jesus”? While we can worship the Lord by doing each one of those things, Moses wants us to know that we won’t be moved to do any of those things unless we first worship the Lord by remembering our past, our rescue, and our present blessings.

We are standing on the edge of the wilderness, looking with great anticipation toward the Promised Land. Just in front of us is the Jordan River Valley, where Jesus’ cousin will baptize him centuries later and God will name him (and every child of God) as Beloved. This river marks the boundary and entrance into a land flowing God’s promise and presence. It is a sight for sore and solemn eyes.

Even as we begin our journey into the wilderness of Lent where parched souls are dry and weary, we are reminded that though we are asked to wander these 40 days, our journey is not aimless. Our “promised land” lies in our rising with Christ. We need to remember that as we explore the wilderness inside our own hearts, we will need God’s “mighty and outstretched arm” to give us direction on our journey. On this journey through Lent and through the wilderness, we need to be reminded who we are and to whom we belong. During these 40 days, we will need to rehearse the story of our faith and find our grounded-ness in the very heart of God.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1-11

26 “When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you as a special possession and you have conquered it and settled there, ² put some of the first produce from each crop you harvest into a basket and bring it to the designated place of worship—the place the LORD your God chooses for his name to be honored. ³ Go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, ‘With this gift I acknowledge to the LORD your God that I have entered the land he swore to our ancestors he would give us.’ ⁴ The priest will then take the basket from your hand and set it before the altar of the LORD your God.

⁵ “You must then say in the presence of the LORD your God, ‘My ancestor Jacob was a wandering Aramean who went to live as a foreigner in Egypt. His family arrived few in number, but in Egypt they became a large and mighty nation. ⁶ When the Egyptians oppressed and humiliated us by making us their slaves, ⁷ we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. He heard our cries and saw our hardship, toil, and oppression. ⁸ So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and powerful arm, with overwhelming terror, and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey! ¹⁰ And now, O LORD, I have brought you the first portion of the harvest you have given me from the ground.’ Then place the produce before

the LORD your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him. ¹¹ Afterward you may go and celebrate because of all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. Remember to include the Levites and the foreigners living among you in the celebration.

Since God knew that the Israelites would be tempted to forget about him once they had settled into their new home of Canaan, he directed the people to bring the first fruits of their harvest to him once they had settled in the Promised Land. As they placed this offering before the Lord at the tabernacle they were to say to the attending priest: *“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous”* (Deut. 26:5b).

The Israelites were to begin their worship of the Lord by remembering their humble past. The Israelites were not descended from people who were known for their military might. Their forefathers were not inventive geniuses who made millions developing new ways of farming or building cities. Nor had their ancestors come up with advances in science or mathematics. The Israelites’ forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, didn’t even own land except for a small burial plot in Canaan.

What made these men and their descendants so famous? Why do we, who are not Jewish, bother to study their history? The history of the Israelites is worth studying because it is the history of God’s grace. God’s undeserved love certainly shone brightly for each one of the patriarchs but let’s take a closer look at the life of Jacob.

Jacob, whose name means “deceiver”, was a fast talker, the kind of guy who could sell you an old rusted car for the cost of a new one. You may remember how Jacob managed to buy his brother’s inheritance for a bowl of soup even though God had promised to give him that same inheritance in his own time and in his own way. Because of his sinful impatience, Jacob made a mess out of things and had to flee home because of his brother’s murderous threats. When Jacob left he had nothing but the clothes on his back and a staff in his hands. God could have punished Jacob for his deception by letting him fend for himself but he didn’t. Instead he went with Jacob and blessed his work so that when Jacob returned to Canaan he came back a rich man. God’s blessings did not end there. When one of Jacob’s sons was made the vice-ruler of Egypt, Jacob and the rest of his family moved to that country where they grew from a tribe of 70 people to a nation of 2 million! When the Israelites came before the Lord with their first fruit offering, they were to remember that it was because of God’s grace, not their own greatness that they had prospered.

We too would do well to remember our humble past when we come before the Lord to worship him for we are like Jacob in many ways aren’t we? We’re good at manipulating others. We don’t always tell the truth. And we’re often impatient for God to fulfill his promises. In spite of that, how has God treated us? Certainly not as calculating sinners deserve to be treated. To find out how God has treated us let’s see first how he treated the Israelites in Egypt.

After Jacob’s descendants had been in Egypt for some time their favored status was revoked and they were enslaved by the Egyptians. The Israelite who was bringing his first fruit offering to the Lord was to review this part of his history as well. He was to say, *“But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a*

mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders” (Deut. 26:6-8).

God used that opportunity while they were slaves as a time of strengthening and a time of focusing their faith. You see it’s not unusual for believers to forget about their God when things are going well. If that’s what had happened to the Israelites in Egypt, then God succeeded in regaining their attention when he let them become slaves for these harassed people quickly cried out to him for deliverance.

Perhaps you feel a bit like the Israelites in Egypt. You’re miserable from your work, which seems like nothing but “toil”. You feel oppressed, you feel squeezed on all sides from the pressures of trying to fit in at school, and you’re wondering if anyone cares or knows what you’re going through. If that is how you feel, take comfort because believers of every generation have felt that way.

Even better, your Savior knows exactly what you’re dealing with. In fact the prophet Isaiah said about Jesus, *“After the suffering (literally “toiling” – the same word used in Deut. 26:7 of the Israelites) of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities”* (Isaiah 53:11). In Jesus we have a Savior who knows what it’s like to live in this world and face the pressures we do.

Jesus, of course, doesn’t just know what we’re going through; he rescues us from our troubles. When the Israelites in Egypt cried out to God he heard and answered their prayers. He delivered them with his “outstretched arm” (Deut. 26:8). Isn’t that a neat picture of God’s care and concern for us? He doesn’t stand idly by with his hands behind his back as we flounder in our problems. No, like a parent watching his child learn how to walk, his hands are out, ready to react and save us from any peril that comes our way. For the Israelites, that meant rescuing from Egypt through the Ten Plagues. For us it may mean that God has kept us safe through childbirth, minimized the damage in a car accident, or even healed something like cancer.

When we think about the dangers from which God has rescued us, we dare not forget how he saved us from sin. God reminded the Israelites of that in the last plague when he told them to put the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses so that the angel of death would pass-over and not harm them. This Passover Lamb foreshadowed what Jesus’ blood would do for all people. The blood that Jesus shed on the cross covers us so that God now passes over us and doesn’t give us the punishment we ought to receive for our sins. Just as the Israelites would be led to praise the Lord when they remembered their rescue from Egypt, we too will sing a loud “Alleluia!” when we remember how God daily rescues us from danger, especially from the curse of sin.

Now it’s one thing to free people from bondage, but quite another thing to give them a good life. God, however, is so great that he not only rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he took them to Canaan where they found a land flowing with milk and honey. God wanted the Israelites to remember this and so when they brought their first fruit offering to the Lord they were to say, *“He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me”* (Deut. 26:9, 10a).

In the same way we too will worship the Lord when we remember our present blessings. We're not always so good at doing this are we? Instead we often talk about the "good old days" as if things aren't so good now. Friends, take the time to think about and thank God for the good things you have right now. I'm confident that you won't have to think very hard to find the blessings that God continues to pour into your life – whether that be the blessing of a place to live, a family to love, or for a God who loves you.

As the Israelites remembered their past, their rescue, and their present blessings they were to express their thanks by giving back to God a portion of the things he had given to them. Now notice how God didn't tell the Israelites to bring something, anything as an offering; he told them to bring the first fruit. In the same way God wants us to show our thanks for what he has done for us by deciding how much we will give back to him first before we spend his money on anything else and end up giving him the leftovers at the end of the month.

It's true that there are all kinds of ways to worship God, in fact the Apostle Paul said, "...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31b). But it's also true that we won't begin to worship him unless we first remember our past, our rescue, and our present blessings. When we remember, powerful things happen. Our hearts as well as our tables become more open, more generous. We recognize the abundance of gifts we have been given is meant to be shared. Suddenly, our hearts and tables begin to look more like God's heart and Christ's Table. *"Do this in remembrance of me,"* Christ says. Tell this story, eat this bread, drink this cup, share all that you are and all that you have in Christ's name. This is the Word that Paul says in Romans is *"near you, on your lips and in your heart."* Think about these things daily so that you will worship God in your prayers, your praises, and in your offerings. Amen.

God's Word: Romans 10:8-13

⁸In fact, it says,

"The message is very close at hand;
it is on your lips and in your heart."

And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: ⁹If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. ¹¹As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." ¹²Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. ¹³For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."

L: The Word of God, for the People of God!

P: Thanks be to God! Amen!