

First Fruits Faith

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

As the time of the wilderness temptation for Jesus lasted 40 days, Lent lasts 40 days. It is a time of basic spiritual restoration and renewal. It is a season for connecting with your spirituality and with your God, realizing that the spark of our faith can wane to be mundane and uninspired. Given time with the wear and tear of daily life, we can depart from good practices, strong beliefs, and faithful grounding. In Lent, we can specify time for sacred scheduling, and initiate the practice of disciplines to get back on track with our life's spirituality, and with our God.

A common belief about Lent is that it needs to focus on penance, acts of contrition for one's sinfulness. People will give up pleasures for Lent as a witness to personal discipline as much as penitential actions. It can seem like we're picking up failed New Year's Resolutions and giving them another try. That would be the wrong approach, of course.

And while self-denial and self-disciplinary aspects *can* apply to Lent, the primary intent of the season is to strengthen our spirituality and remove from our relationship with God those key things which are obstacles and distractions for us. Jesus' journey into the wilderness aims to stretch him spiritually, to test his limits and push his boundaries in order to learn about any weakness with the intent of strengthening himself for the journey ahead. So, it is not simply penitential acts or a season for sacrifice and self-denial, but hopefully a time of growth, renewal, and spiritual strengthening, knowing that there are many challenges that confront us all the time. With Lent, we can realize how profoundly these obstacles and distractions take us away from the promise and purpose of our God. With Lent, we intentionally dislodge ourselves from the commonplace and ordinary with a discipline in order to recognize what stands between us and our faith relationship with God and with others.

Let's consider the passage from Deuteronomy 26 about first fruits being brought to the "priest in office at the time," a rather elaborate expression for a people who have yet to establish any priesthood much less a place to bring offerings like a temple much less have land on which to place such a temple and a priest – they haven't even crossed into the promised Land yet! Regardless, Moses is telling the people about how they will identify themselves in thanksgiving before God.

We have to imagine ourselves at the harvest season in the Promised Land. They haven't arrived in the Promised Land yet, but they are getting instructions nonetheless because someone was reading ahead and found out that they eventually get there. Besides God is faithful, as the whole Exodus from Egypt has proven, so naturally they will come to the Promised Land. When they get there and they enjoy the harvest of God's blessings, this is how they are instructed to conduct themselves.

The preamble to this section opens with a reminder, *When you have entered the land that **the Lord your God has given you** as an inheritance, and have taken*

possession of it, and settled in it. This is important for God's people to remember. It is also something for God's people **today** to remember. They (and we) are to remember that our prosperity is what *the Lord your God has given you*. You did not simply acquire this land. You did not simply harvest the crops. You did not simply gain your blessings without the blessed hand of God.

Indeed, you would have no harvest without God. You would have no crops without God. You would have no land without God. In fact, your sorry excuse for a humanoid, you would still be a slave in Egypt were it not for the hand of mighty God. If you've got your head on straight, then you know that it is your sacred obligation to make a thank offering to the Lord from the first fruits of your harvest. The Lord your God who enabled your blessings has expectations from you, so – for your own good – pay attention here.

The faithful one is to say this at the time of offering:

'My father was a wandering Aramean; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now I bring the first fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.

These words form a primary expression of one's Jewish identity. It is an affirmation of faith. Just as we would say, *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth*, in repeating the words of the Apostle's Creed, a Jew at the harvest will say, *My father was a wandering Aramean and he went down into Egypt*. Where the Christian's Apostle's Creed is more of an affirmation of key theological points about God and Jesus, for the Jew, this affirmation is **the base story** of Judaism.

The important feature of this affirmation of faith, this story of salvation, is that the worshiper takes credit for **nothing** except bringing the offering, acknowledging that these are *the first fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me*. The worshiper has done nothing, is nothing, and has only one role. The role of the faithful one is to love and to honor the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength – all spelled out in Deuteronomy 6:4, including the admonition to tell every generation, a further reminder that you did nothing to get this, that God did everything, and that God does not appreciate any of your cutesy games to get around what God expects from you.

That brings us to the key concept that identifies your faithfulness. It is not your wise, humble, and pious utterances flowing from your lips, nor is it the inspired quality of your prayers, or your devotion to justice, or the amount of time you put in at the soup kitchen, or the way you hand out five dollar bills to panhandlers standing in the median.

None of those constitute the key concept that identifies your faithfulness in God's eyes. What matters? You are obedient to the Lord your God and you bring your gratitude *in the righteous amount* before the Lord. You do not pay some bills before you bring the first fruits, nor do you buy next year's seed, nor do you take your wife out to a nice kosher dinner, nor do you invest in your 401(k), nor do you even pay the rent. Your first fruits go directly to the priest – no detours, no excuses, no shenanigans – as an affirmation and witness of faith stating, *I serve the Lord my God alone; I offer God my gratitude for every blessing*. Again: *I serve my God alone, I offer God my gratitude for every blessing*. Identify yourself one more time: *My father was a wandering Aramean and he went down into Egypt*, and like him, I am dependent on God's grace for my blessings.

Now you noticed how the focus was on money, or worldly assets, in this case first fruits of the harvest. That is really annoying because if there is one thing we don't want to talk about it, it's money. If you want to see people squirm like there was a sudden infestation of fleas, don't talk about drinking, don't even talk about sex, and don't bother talking about gossip. No, make God's people squirm and wiggle like worms as soon as you start talking about money. Why does money do that to folks? Because now you're touching what is truly sacred.

Of course, the Lord God of the Jews and the Christians is not a stupid deity, and knows very clearly who or what competes with God for the fidelity, obedience, adoration and devotion of God's people. Money, money, money. God knows.

That whole business with an offering of first fruits going together with a statement of faith; totally brilliant. We should take the offering *while* people are saying the Apostle's Creed or even the Lord's Prayer. You wouldn't dare put in a mere tuppence while you were saying those, would you? Yup, a "Mary Poppins" tuppence.

God is wise to useless flattery. God has had a few millennia to endure enough of it. There is a story of French archbishop Francois Fenelon who served in the court of King Louis XIV. Fenelon had a reputation as a troublemaker, so it's quite believable that one Sunday when the king arrived for the worship service, there was no one there except the archbishop. The king was appalled. "What does this mean?"

Fenelon replied, "I had published notice that you would not come to church today, in order that your Majesty might see who serves God in truth and who flatters the king." Clearly Fenelon proved that none served God in truth and only sought to flatter the king. In short, the members of the French King's court were weenies. But let's not be too hard on them; we're all pretty weenified ourselves in our own ways.

Our most problematic idols are those things that obstruct and distract us from the love and grace, the purpose and promise of God. Our longing for wealth, our desire for power, our wish for authority, our belief that it really is all about ourselves and our own little view of the world. All of those things divert our attention and deflect the promise of God that would work through us.

Spiritual strengthening through spiritual discipline is how we are able to improve our attention and devotion to our God. We all want the power and promise of God to be working through us, not getting sidetracked into self-serving and useless schemes.

May we use this Lenten period to adopt or adapt a new discipline (or two) that would get us focused on the singular and unique nature of our God who blesses us richly in every way, worshiping and serving our God alone.