

Text: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Title: First Fruits of Lent
Date: 03.06.22
Roger Allen Nelson

Margret Renkel left the church. Through no choice of her own, pandemic quarantines left her unchurched; eventually she left for good. In her words:

I came to understand that my growing feeling of spiritual alienation wasn't temporary. I loved my parish, and I loved our brilliant, compassionate pastor, but I was done with the institutional church.

She's not alone. The last few years accelerated a movement. Most churches today are smaller, frayed on the edges, and anxious about the future. Even as we joyfully shed masks there's still frustration, fear, and uncertainty. As I was counseled recently, "There's no going back to what we were....."

So where do we go? Even as we begin Lent, where do we go? What can we rightly expect? Is this to be a season of lament and longing and giving something up?

Again, Margret Renkel:

In the old days, my Lenten resolution almost always meant giving up something whose absence I would feel acutely: coffee, perhaps, or cussing. In that way I would be reminded, again and again, of what this season is for. But the practice of imposed sacrifice feels alien to me... Haven't we all had enough sacrifice in these last years? Every day I grieve two beloved family members lost during this pandemic. Every day I bear the grief of a burning world. I don't need to give up cussing at Vladimir Putin, too.

During their midlife years of creeping weight gain, my mother and father would announce that they were losing 10 pounds for Lent, a goal I always found hilarious. As a Lenten resolution, it did bear some resemblance to the fasting and sackcloth of the early days of Christianity, if not for an entirely spiritual reason. I'm no theologian, but I feel sure that Jesus did not spend 40 days and 40 nights in the desert so he could fit into his old jeans.

Dear friends, Lent (the 40 days preceding Easter) has been traditionally understood as a period of fasting, prayer, penance, and almsgiving. While not mentioned or instructed in scripture there's evidence that Lent dates back to the earliest practices of the church. By the Council of Nicaea in 325 there's a firm establishment of the practice.

Those commitments to fasting, prayer, and penance were meant to strengthen devotion in preparation for Easter, but as the practice took hold questions and controversies developed over the rules:

What are appropriate expressions of repentance?

How long should one fast and from what foods?
What are the loopholes?

During the early Middle Ages, meat, eggs, and dairy products were generally forbidden during Lent. Thomas Aquinas argued that these foods increased sperm production and therefore increased lust. So, no meat for Lent in order to reign in lust, but knock yourself out with a Friday fish fry.

There's also evidence that you could cut corners and consume dairy in return for a donation to the church. The "Butter Tower" of the cathedral in Rouen, France was built through such contributions. You could buy your way to a cheesy omelet and build a church addition at the same time. Bonus!

So, how should we enter Lent? Given the tumult and trouble of today how should approach the next forty days? I offer this morning's text as a place to begin.

After being freed from Egyptian captivity, after forty years in the wilderness, and as the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses delivered rules about how they were to live in covenant with God. While these laws include the Ten Commandments, there are endless instructions that fleshed out the implications. Our text this morning comes at the end of better than a dozen chapters of such laws.

There are directions about war, worship, and what to eat. There are guidelines for animal husbandry, harvest festivals, and what to do with a rebellious son. There are instructions concerning skin diseases, nocturnal emissions, and gardening. The demands and details are staggering. There's a lot of stoning. It doesn't end well for the rebellious son.....

Our text is positioned at the end of this catalog of commandments and right before a liturgical framework for how the Israelites are to renew the covenant as they enter into the Promised Land.

So.....

These instructions about bringing a basket of first fruits are rooted in the giving of a "land flowing with milk and honey." God's people are to bring offerings of grain and fruit from the very soil that God promised to Abraham. The instructions are grounded in a spirit of gratitude.

7 times in these 11 verses the verb "to give" is used, and 6 of those 7 times it refers to the land and the gifts of land that are provided by God. The seventh use of the verb refers to the hard labor that the Egyptians gave to the Israelites. It's a reminder that the one who delivered them from captivity is the same one delivering them into the Promised Land. Bringing first fruits is rooted in remembering all that they'd been given.

And therefore, the instructions for how to offer these first fruits includes a testimony, "a short historical creed," proclaiming where they were, what they suffered, and what brought them to this land of plenty.

Again, thanksgiving is linked to memory. The story of hard labor and freedom from captivity is told so that the next generation can know and express gratitude for all of God's gifts.

Now. The last line in our text is easily lost. As a family would bring their offering to the altar and bow before the Lord, there's this instruction:

Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given you and your household.

The offering of first fruits ensures that the entire community shares in the land's abundance. The Levites (a tribe of priests not allotted land of their own) were supported in their religious service through such offerings. The second group, the foreigners, lived among the Israelites without owning land. So, as first fruits were shared – everybody joined in the bounty. As those who were once landless and vulnerable remembered what they were given, everyone, including those now landless and vulnerable, would share in the blessing of God.

It's a beautiful picture, isn't it? You've been led out of captivity by God, you've been given a "promised land," and the first thing that God wants is a gratitude that's shared with others.

Of course, there's evidence that the Israelites didn't always live into those instructions: the priests abused the bounty and the aliens were neglected. Scripture is full of prophetic voices calling God's people to remember this "first fruits ethic," to do justice and love mercy. Over and over again they are called back to God's way of ordering life. They are chided and challenged to

remember their captivity,
remember their liberation,
remember who gave them the land,
and remember that these good gifts are for the good of others.

Dear friends, we've been through a hard two years.

Not exactly Egyptian captivity and wandering in the wilderness, but we've been separated from one another, we've lost loved ones to a virus, and we've wandered in uncertainty and misinformation. Relationships have been strained over how best to respond to a pandemic. A shared commitment in Christ was scuttled over masks, vaccines, and an understanding of the common good. Worship habits were broken and it became easier to unhitch from community.

The last few years have been called the "Great Sorting." Not a time of great revival or great reconciliation, but a further sorting of American churches into political silos. We've been through a hard two years.

As Debra Rienstra writes,

It's hard to process all this. We thought American politics were a mess (they are). Many of us have been watching our denominations fracture (again). Covid is now more manageable—maybe—but who knows what's next. And now we're scrambling to understand the mind of a "dead-eyed zealot" pushing a stupid and morally repugnant invasion while the world falls apart around us anyway.

I don't know where to turn in that wilderness. I don't know where to go. There is an impulse to think primarily of self and seek solely after power or wealth. But this morning's text invites us to different way of being.

Our beginning place is memory.

Our beginning place is gratitude.

Our beginning place is giving first fruits.

During Lent, in sermon and sacrament, we're going to reflect not on what's been lost, or on what we can give up, but on what we've been given and on what we can give. We'll remember and recite where we've been, where we are, and consider what first fruits we can offer. We'll invite reflection on deliverance and abundance and a first fruits ethic. My prayer is that these forty days will deepen our devotion to God and to one another.

Therefore, this morning, we remember the hard labor of our world, but we also remember how God in Christ has delivered us from captivity. As those led through the wilderness and into a place of *shalom*, we come to a table of abundance.

We cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, 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,.... He brought us to this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me.

In memory and gratitude for all that God has given may this feast strengthen our devotion, renew our hope, and be inclusive of others.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.