

“A Lenten Walk, with the Bible Jesus Read, Part One: Gratitude”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 14th 2016 (First Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

It occurred to me this past week...occurred to me that I have managed—with the sermon series I’m about to launch—occurred to me that I have managed to combine into one ominous package, two of the things that most terrify typical United Church folk.

The first of those things is, of course, this season: this newly hatched Lenten season. For many Protestants, Lent evokes not entirely welcome images of foreheads adorned with ashes, stomachs deprived of food, and much of life drained of its joy for six full weeks. What’s there not to like?!!

The second of those things—things that tend to make us a trifle uneasy—is what we generally refer to as the Old Testament. Having attempted on numerous occasions to introduce groups of United Church congregants to the very large chunk of material that comes first in our Christian Bibles—using a wide variety of resources during the course of a 25 year ministry—I am well aware of the extent to which the Old Testament can prove to be off-putting. While there are many factors that contribute to our unease with the Old Testament—not least the fact that many of the episodes are shockingly violent and leave a rather odd impression of the Bible’s central character, namely God—the off-putting factor of which I am especially aware as I launch this Lenten walk, has to do with nothing fancier than the fact that the Old Testament is a very big book, roughly three times the size of the New. Very big...very ancient (some of its parts likely grounded in an oral tradition that goes back 3500 years or more)...and astonishingly varied in terms of its contents. And so yes, my seeking to combine in one sermon series what many of us perceive as the grim contours of Lent, with what many of us perceive as the even grimmer contours of the Old Testament, might well be regarded as a fool’s errand. Then again...fools rush in...and all of that jazz. Which means, here we are!! But now here’s the thing.

I often find myself coming back to the title of a book written by my favourite evangelical writer: Philip Yancey. The book I have in mind: *The Bible Jesus Read: Why the Old Testament Matters*. And you know: there is a very real sense in which the first half of that title provides the answer to the implicit question found in the second half of that title. Why does the Old Testament matter? Why? In large measure, because it’s the Bible Jesus read. Trust me! Jesus of Nazareth did not grow up delving into the deep meanings of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Nor did Joseph and Mary tuck him in at night by regaling him with stories drawn from the Gospel According to Mark. No. The Bible Jesus read is the Bible we call the Old Testament, with its sprawling sagas, its

remarkable short stories, its elaborate codes of law, its strongly worded prayers, its hair-raising prophetic collections and its oddly diverse assortment of wisdom books. That book...this book...was the book Jesus knew and read...the book that shaped his world-view, his basic outlook, his core understanding of God and humanity. As disciples, as followers of Christ, to bypass this book is to bypass a whole heck of a lot. Which brings us this morning...well: which brings us this morning to that strange little episode from the Bible's fifth book, Deuteronomy.

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For those of you with fading memories—or for those of you with no memory of having ever walked through the Old Testament—let's begin by noting that the core story, the central story, of the Old Testament is found in its first five books, sometimes called the Pentateuch, sometimes called the Torah. Central to that core story is the escape of a rag-tag assortment of Hebrew slaves, fleeing from bondage in Egypt, under the reluctant leadership of Moses. That story is introduced in the Bible's first book—Genesis—which concludes by explaining how it is that these slaves, originally from the south-western tip of Asia—managed to end up in Africa, managed to end up in Egypt. That's followed in the Bible's second book with the core story, their escape from slavery. What follows next in the second half of the book Exodus—as well as in the next two books Leviticus and Numbers—is an elaborate set of laws laying out the proposed life of this community of ex-slaves. What also follows in these books is a series of narratives that explain just why it is that they spend 40 years wandering in the desert, followed by a depiction of some of the things they get up to while they are in the desert. But at the end of the fourth of those books—Numbers—they are ready to cross over, ready to cross over into the land God has promised them. And it's here—as this motley group of the children of ex-slaves prepares to enter the land—it's here that the Bible's fifth book, Deuteronomy, marches onto the stage.

At its heart, Deuteronomy is a book of recapitulation: a book that seeks to summarize everything that has so far transpired just prior to ancient Israel entering and beginning its new life in the land. A series of stirring sermons preached by Moses...

...the main one of those sermons is so lengthy, that if I tried preaching it this morning we'd definitely have no choice but to postpone our Annual General Meeting!...

...a series of sermons preached by Moses, Deuteronomy consists mainly of a restatement of the law-code, but retold in such a way as to mix those laws with a continual stream of lofty prose, seeking to admonish and inspire a people who are on the verge of making a fresh start. It's a stirring book. And yes, it's a book that houses one of the most peculiar little rituals found anywhere in the Bible: that ritual of the first-fruits from Deuteronomy's 26th chapter.

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, 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.

And no: there is nothing especially noteworthy so far, because that sort of thank-offering, that kind of gratitude expressed for the bounty of the good earth, is something with which all cultures are familiar. But what follows, once that basket of first-fruit is brought to the Temple, is more than a little surprising.

*When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God,
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.
When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us,
by imposing hard labour on us,
we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors;
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.*

You see: this little ritual may well have begun its life as a strictly agricultural ceremony, one in which the only real purpose was to give thanks for the earth's bounty. In the Hebraic world, however—in other words, in the world shaped by the Bible Jesus read—it's not enough to give thanks for the natural world. Gratitude...gratitude in the world shaped by the Old Testament...is gratitude also offered (perhaps supremely offered) for the gift of the story, for the gift of the narrative, for the gift of the mighty acts through which God has brought a people up from bondage. A handful of things follow from that.

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First! Those who received—including those who still receive—their understanding of the world from the pages of the Bible Jesus read, are those who know how precious a thing remembrance is and always shall be. When those ancient Israelites came before the Priest with their basket of fruits and vegetables, they were to pause long enough to remember who they were and how they got to be where they were. Above all, they were to remember that

wandering Aramean—that scoundrel Jacob—who was their ancestor and would always remain their ancestor. And, of course, they were to remember that they would have nothing—that they would not even be a people—were it not for the gracious generosity of the God who had protected Jacob in his wanderings, who continued to protect them in their wanderings. To remember is at the heart of whatever spirituality emerges from the pages of the Old Testament. Nor, I hasten to add, is it any different for those whose core spirituality emerges from the pages of the New Testament.

And you know: it's hard nowadays to be an advocate on behalf of—just as it is hard to be a community shaped by—a series of events that took place 2000 years ago. Nevertheless! Just as recollection, remembrance, of the pivotal events of the Exodus continue to shape the self-understanding of the observant Jewish community some 3500 years after the initial impact of those events, it's no less the case that recollection, remembrance, of the pivotal events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ continue to shape the self-understanding of the Christian community, some two millennia after those events transpired. Remembrance is a non-negotiable part of our heritage. Remembrance...and not just any sort of remembrance: but remembrance sautéed in gratitude. Remembrance...remembrance immersed in that most essential of spiritual practices, the one we call thanksgiving, the one we call gratitude, to which one further note needs to be added.

Such gratitude, the offering of such gratitude, need not be based upon a blinkered experience of the world. If the Old Testament knows anything, it knows how to lay out its anguish in the presence of God. There are more psalms of lament, than any other kind of psalm found in the pages of the Bible Jesus read. And that, of course, doesn't even begin to number the countless expressions of lament scattered throughout the narrative books of the Bible, throughout the prophetic books of the Bible, with at least one of the wisdom books of the Bible—Job consisting of pretty much a lament from start to finish! Gratitude in the Old Testament—as in the New—does not require us to imagine the world any better than it is. All gratitude requires in the world of the Old Testament—as in the world of the New—is the recognition of God at the head of all things, all that was and is and evermore shall be, world without end, amen!: in short, recognition that we would all be nothing more than wandering Arameans without the stubborn love of the God for whom all things are possible. All things!

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A final thought.

To begin our Lenten walk, as we have just done, with a copy of the Bible Jesus read, far from sentencing us to six weeks of grim self-negation, ought to lead us in pretty much the opposite direction. If we take this morning's text at its word, the only thing we most definitely **do** need to give up for Lent is our

forgetfulness...our tendency to take life's blessings for granted, leaving us free to focus all of our energy and attention upon life's challenges and shortcomings. But when we take time to pull back and remember...to remember who we are...to remember the love we have been shown by the God we have yet to see...to remember and never to forget...to remember...and as we do so...to offer a quiet but genuine word of gratitude: not only for life's blessings, but for the measureless gift of life-itself. To do that...to do that is a Lenten sacrifice with which I am convinced, our God is well pleased! It may only be a first step, but it is a first step without which none of the other steps will likely ever be taken. And so let us enter into this season with grateful hearts, hearts alive with the love of God.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!