FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“First Fruit and Lent”* Deuteronomy 26:1-11

The story of Moses instructing the Israelites on offering the first fruits of their labor seems like an odd place to begin the season of Lent. We are just beginning our forty-day journey. Whereas in this passage, Moses and his people were finally coming to the end of their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. And although this is only a small part of his sermon, Moses manages to encapsulate the sum of the peoples’ history *and* a blueprint for their life in the Promised Land. It is a plan and a journey that have relevance for us, too.

As a prologue to their new life, Moses reminds the people of their recent history of enslavement in Egypt and the suffering and the hard labor they endured. In the land they are about to enter—the land flowing with milk and honey—their life will be one of freedom, but it will also be a freedom that will always remember what and where they came from.

They will remember the mighty displays of strength God worked on their behalf in order to free them and bring them out of Egypt—they will remember by bringing the first fruits of the land as an offering in worship. Each year, they are to do this. In so doing, they will acknowledge the way in which God brought them into the land and presented it to them as a gift. They will do it as an act of worship.

In so doing, they will remember that they did not have to *earn* this great blessing. It was a gift from a mighty and generous God, and their response is that they will work the land and produce a good harvest. That is: they will care for the land and their own needs by being hard-working and industrious. They will provide for themselves and their families, and they will faithfully remember and give thanks to their faithful God by bringing a basket filled with their produce as proof and an offering.

Yet, it must also be acknowledged that the fact that the land was “given” to the Israelites should never be understood in any absolute sense; Biblical Israel understood itself to be the working tenant of a land, which belonged ultimately to God. What Israel presented, therefore, in terms of offerings, was in reality a giving *back* to the one who had first given them freedom, prosperity and security to make the gifts a possibility.

This is all well and good. However, there is more.

That gift of first fruits is a gift given directly to the giver of their new life and is meant to establish a continuing relationship of gratitude between the people and God. Moreover, offerings of grain and fruit grown in the very soil of that land would confirm the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.

However, according to Moses God not only desires to establish a relationship of gratitude and thanksgiving with God’s-self and the people, but also *between* God’s beloved people.

And so, Moses calls on the people *“together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you,* [you] *shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.”* [v. 11] That is: they are to share their good fortune with the other people among them who will *not* receive a portion of the land the way the Israelites will—all are to be included in the abundance God is giving.

To emphasize the point, as they hand-over the basket-full of first fruits to the priest, they are to recite their history beginning with: *“‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor;’”* [v. 5]. This recalls the Israelites’ ancestor Jacob, also known by the name Israel, who fled from his brother Esau’s enmity to live with relatives in Aram and who later emigrated with his family to Egypt to survive a famine.

Even more than a reminder of their ancestor, Jacob, the term “a wandering Aramean” has deeper meaning than what we see at first glance.

To be a person who is “wandering” implies that he had little or none of the marks of prosperity. He had no home, no home*land*. A wanderer portrays a person who has no family, no family connections. Therefore, no heritage, no history. He is a stranger and an alien—two things that made it difficult for the individual to become a part of the community.

In the midst of their abundance and their possessions—of land and crops, and all of the good things such a life can bestow—God requires the people to remember where and what they came from, and instead of consigning aliens and strangers to the same fate they had suffered, they were to bring them in and share with them in the same way that God had brought them in as God’s beloved.

As one scholar has put it: *The memory of being landless and vulnerable, preserved here as well as in the longer liturgical recitation in Deuteronomy 26:5-10, cultivates an ethic of empathy as the basis for including those currently landless and vulnerable.*

God’s inclusive generosity embraces us all, to be experienced again and again as together we share bread, wine, food, and everything else that supports and enhances life.

So, how are we to hear this passage—we who are so far removed from the Israelites?

It may help to deliberately name some of the ways which separate us from the first people who heard Moses speak.

To begin with, we are more than three thousand years removed from the Israelites. We are no longer farmers. Many of us do not even *know* a farmer.

Although many of us have our own stories of a historical-cultural trauma, it will be a different story than that of the Israelites and their story at this point in history.

We do, however, have a story of rescue and redemption as do the ancient Israelites. Where they have the story of the many plagues and the parting of the Red Sea as their story of God’s saving grace, our story, of course, is of Jesus who accomplishes in his own body the liberation and freedom the Israelites experienced on the shores of the Red Sea, and as they gathered on the banks of the Jordan waiting for the signal that Moses had concluded his instructions to them and they were free to cross-over into the land flowing with milk and honey.

As peoples—the Israelites *and* us—who have been given so much, we are not only to gratefully receive what we have been given, we are to allow God’s loving actions toward us shape to who we are. This includes how we treat one another, how we receive one another.

What Moses’ words to the ancient Israelites describes is God’s desire that we learn how to see our own life and history as it is reflected in the lives of those around us—especially in the lives of those who have less than we do now. We are to remember a time when we were the ones in need. In fact, it need not be we, ourselves, who were in need. We are to include in our attitude toward one another, the way in which our ancestors were treated. We are to embrace and nurture a strong sense of empathy for one another.

One of the stories I like to repeat that demonstrates the kind of empathy God ordained we should have for one another happened about thirty years ago now among the churches in Kalaupapa. I do not remember the exact year it happened, but the two churches, Kanaana Hou and Siloama became the second church to officially become Open and Affirming in Hawaii.

The pastor of both of these yoked churches was the late Lon Ryecroft. The next time I saw him at an ‘Aha Pae’aina I asked him how he had managed to persuade them to become ONA.

He said, “I didn’t have to do anything. They saw how LBGT people were treated (especially during the AIDS epidemic) and they said, ‘Hey, that’s how *we* were treated.’” That was all they needed: to see and acknowledge the same pain in another group of people were experiencing.

In our own time, during this past week, there has been an unprecedented out-pouring of support for the people of Ukraine as they have faced the invasion of their country and the destruction and death of so many of their people. I pray we will all continue empathize with the great anguish they are experiencing and support them and the million refugees this war with Russia has already created, in every way we can.

I also hope we can keep our attention tuned-in to the many issues we face here at home that also need our attention. Even more than that, the issues here will need our empathy in order to come to a good and righteous conclusion.

Just this past Wednesday, I was speaking to one of the members at Community Church. I said that as I drove past their church on the freeway side, I often saw people going on to the state property that butts-up against theirs—homeless people who set-up camp and are living there.

The Community Church member was exasperated but determined. He is exasperated because the campers often come on to their church property. He wants to welcome them, but neither the church folk nor the campers have found a way to be in relationship with one another.

To his great credit, he wants the relationship—that is a good beginning—he recognizes their humanity and he wants to do the right thing. He wants to be able to present his gift of first fruit to God with a heart and spirit that knows it is struggling toward the real fruit God wants us to have which is a love that can gather-up and find worth in all God’s beloved children.

However, he has found out what we all know but need to acknowledge: which is that some relationships are not going to be easy. That does not mean that we are to give up on them. God has never given up on us. Indeed, after this particular story of the Israelites’, the relationship between them and God continued to be fraught with the peoples’ failure and God’s disappointment.

Through it all God never gave up—even to the point of sending a Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. How can we respond to this but with our own dedication to finding a way toward one another, a way in which we, too, may show God our gratitude, acknowledge God’s generosity and treat it with the respect it deserves: by sharing with one another—especially the aliens and vulnerable among us.

Friends, as we begin our Lenten journey, I pray that we may remember and reflect on this story of first fruits, and dedicate ourselves to bringing God the fruitfulness of our lives—lives filled with the courage to remember our own struggles and blessings as we meet others, and by so doing, find ourselves being ready to bless and support and share in God’s name.

May this be so. Amen.