

Wandering Home: Led to Wander

First Sunday of Lent

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Texts: Deuteronomy 26.1-11;
Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16;
Romans 10.8b-13;
Luke 4.1-13

Every time we ask you to name some of the highlights of our ministry the Witnesses to Reconciliation – the testimonies people share - is always at the top of the list. I was thinking about it this week; why those moments have become so important in our life together. When I was reading the passage from Deuteronomy this week I realized something important about those moments of our worship. When people bear witness to where God has been at work in the particular details of their life they are doing precisely what was commanded of God's people here in Deuteronomy 26.

When the people of Israel were settling into the promised land, they were told to take the first fruits from their harvest and offer it at the place of worship and to recount the story of how God had been at work in the lives of their ancestors. In worship, there are truths about God that we want to hold up together. We can talk about those truths on the level of idea or concept. When we see how that abstract idea is rooted in a particular experience of someone's life then we can begin to imagine how this truth might be lived out in our particular experience. That is what the book of Deuteronomy is inviting the people of Israel to do. They are told when you make your offering don't just hand it over as if it were some a rule to follow or tax you owe the temple. No! When you come to bring that offering remember your history. Remember the story of God alive among your people.

The practice of linking the truths of God to the stories of our life is important for two reasons. What you begin to see is that God is remarkably creative in appropriating every part of our experience in God's work to bring shalom or peace to the world. We watched last week as the youth

enacted the story of Joseph. Let's just say there were ample opportunities for the creativity of God's Spirit to be at work! Take a snapshot of any one of fifteen parts of that story and people are doing despicable things (Joseph included). It looks like God is nowhere to be seen. But as the story unfolds you discover that God is right in the middle of it all. I don't mean that God is pulling strings or orchestrating every move. There is all kinds of human freedom and moments of decision and the consequences that flow from those decisions. There is wrestling with the evil impulses that can rise within us.

The temptation story from Luke today lifts up for us what those existential moments are like. There are moments of decision where our thinking and the influences on us lead to a distortion. While Jesus demonstrates for us how we might find our way out of that distortion, we know that we often fail. We have story after story from the scriptures like the story of Joseph. We have experience after experience in our reality today that points to that failure. What we also see through those stories is the way in which God's Spirit continues to be at work prompting us after moments of failure to make amends or pushing those around us to step into the gap. We see creative responses that redeem and totally alter what *could* have been the trajectory of one poor choice. Our lives are all so interconnected it is really impossible to know how any one moment will be taken up and used by God for some future purpose that we cannot see right now.

This is the first piece I want to lift up for us: there is nothing in our life that is wasted in God's economy. God can use everything from the shining moments in life that we look back on with pride to the wrenching mistakes that we will regret for the rest of our life and everything in between. So that's the first thing.

Here's the second and it's closely related. Not only can God use every piece of our experience including the shady parts we would just as soon forget. God is present – with us – through every part and in every place we go even when we have no sense of that connection whatsoever. In Deuteronomy, the people are invited to remember a season of their life when they felt a palpable absence of God. They are told to recite: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, he went down into Egypt, ... When

the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us...we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction.....The Lord brought us out of Egypt...and brought us to this place....So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”¹

You can see what is being fostered here in the consciousness of God’s people in this ritual around their offerings. They are being invited into the experience of their ancestors. As they make connections to that story that are invited to consider truth of God as a God of compassion and a God of liberation; a God who is present in the wandering and suffering just as much as the triumph of life. When you begin to see the way that the compassionate and liberating God moves among us - when you begin to see the way that God can use anything for the sake of the gospel - that no one who believes in God will be put to shame as we hear Romans today then we can begin to trust that wherever we are at - God is there. That’s the second thing.

Here is the freedom in all of this. It’s a freedom that people have been demonstrating when they have shared with us their testimonies. When you know that nothing in your life is wasted and that wherever you are at God is there, you don’t have to pretend that you have it all together. You don’t have to hide the painful parts of your past. No need to posture. I was remembering something Nadia Boltz Weber once wrote in her blog: “I used to think that repentance meant to feel so bad about being bad that you promise to not be bad anymore. But now I see repentance as just returning again to God.”²

That’s how I’ve come to think of Lent: a time of turning again toward God (who never left in the first place). A time to acknowledge what we may have lost track of...that God is here, wherever “here” is for you right now. That God looks at us with compassion especially when we are struggling and God longs for our liberation.

¹ Excerpts from Deuteronomy 26.5-10, NRSV.

² From Rev. Nadia Boltz Weber’s blog “*Sarcastic Lutheran: The cranky spirituality of a post-modern gal*”

I want to share a poem this morning that captures the heart of this Word today quite beautifully. It was written by our own Pastor Gordon Wiersma during Lent in 2007. It's entitled *Life and Times of Wandering Aramean*.

it's in the genes, it seems, the wandering.
an Aramean, I, by spiritual heredity -
as much in the DNA as anything else.

it's nice to think, sometimes,
that the wandering is only of the Exodus sort:
journeying from bondage to freedom,
crying ended with honey balm
and whole milk too;

destination promised.

but upon further review
we Arameans (welcome to the family!)
have wander-lust enough to fill a lifetime
(a desert by any other name);
as prone to travel into bondage,
as apt to mourn our manna
and bite the hand that feeds;

anything to stay lost.

it's in the genes, it seems, the wandering.
and there are genes in that One,
cell and Spirit.
a wandering into ours,
an Exodus into bondage,
emptiness and nourishment fused;

journey joined.

it's Who the wander-lust in us Arameans
kept us from finding
(the Devil is in the directions, and on top of the temple too),
so instead the wandering is embraced
(time to wash our genes)

and the Traveler refuses to leave us lost;
destination found.

Friends, the one who joins our journey, who refuses to leave us lost, the one who understands from the inside the depth of our temptations and struggles, invites us to feast at his table. This feast of love set is for you (for me) by our Lord Jesus as a way to remember and seal upon our hearts that nothing is lost and God is here.

Thanks be to God.