

Remember Who You Are
Deuteronomy 26.1-11, Luke 4.1-13
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Lent 1C
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Welcome to the season of Lent. Perhaps you have been preparing for these weeks and already anticipate a new Lenten practice each year. You received ashes on Wednesday and mentally shifted into this time of reflection as you heard, "From ashes you come, to ashes you will return." You feel the invitation to focused reflection and are welcoming a slower time and holy pace.

Or perhaps the concept of Lent and a personal Lenten practice is new (even strange) to you. Is it just for Catholics? Is it self-criticism to earn God's affection? Is Lent about feeling guilty for 40 days? Isn't it just a diet plan with a little spiritual language dusted across the top of it? Or people give up something they were ready to be done with anyway, "No more king cake," or something most folks can't abide on a regular week, "No more liver and onions."

Wherever you are on that spectrum of familiar and already invested in personal Lenten practice or unfamiliar and suspicious of what this season is about, my hope is that we will journey together each week through the readings, prayers, and music of worship to a deeper sense of how God is present to us and a clearer sense of who we were created to be. The lesson this week is about remembering who you are.

We begin in Deuteronomy 26, our first text read by Darrell Smith. Deuteronomy contains a series of guiding speeches that intend to shape the life of Israel after the Exodus. Some of the sections read like ancient bylaws that will govern a people while others, like the verses we are considering in chapter 26, are more like a worship guide and prayer book. "The words uttered here are often called a 'credo,'...they provide the earliest examples of members of the community of God's people confessing their faith, declaring before God and each other what God has done on their behalf."¹

The children of Israel have followed Moses and are now in a place of great freedom and abundance. The proper response, they are told, must be gratitude and joyful acknowledgement that God has given them a life of freedom. It may be easy for us to

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpretation: Deuteronomy*, pp. 180-181

dehumanize this story and these characters thinking, "How could they ever forget? Wouldn't such a dynamic act of God be seared in their memories forever?" Yet we forget all the time. We forget that our lives are gift. We forget that it is a miracle to take a new breath each morning. We forget that our children are surprise and delight. We forget what it is like to pass through a time of great suffering and reach the other side with loving friends waiting to support and love us. These worship instructions were passed through Moses to the people of Israel and taught over and over again until today because God knows we forget who we are. And we forget who God is. And we need our acts of worship to be acts of remembering.

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, **2** 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. **3** You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."

4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, **5** 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. **6** When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, **7** we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. **8** 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; **9** and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. **11** Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

The very best of what they have been given is to be brought back to God with joy and gratitude. The call is not to live and enjoy and then scrape the leftovers before God. The call is for first fruits and not dregs—your freshest energy, the free time you've been saving, whatever is the equivalent in your life of a bountiful harvest, that is what we see and remember and claim for God.

The word in Deuteronomy 26 is: God has given you great freedom. Remember your story. Remember for yourself, for each other, for your children. Everything that sustains your life is a gift. Say thank you. You have tremendous abundance around you. Share the best of what you have and who you are with those around you—your closest friends, the stranger you meet, the poor who do not have the luxury of time and resources that you do. When you remember who you are and share the best parts of your life from a deep well of gratitude, you honor God.

We move from that text to Luke 4, Jesus tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus has been baptized by John, a voice from heaven has claimed Jesus with the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Luke then tells us Jesus was about 30-years-old when he began his work and proceeds to list his paternal relatives all the way back to the beginning of time. We readers know who Jesus is and where he is placed in history. Jesus knows who he is and where he is placed in history. Then that same Spirit that hovered over his baptism guides him to a wild place for this time alone of fasting and temptation.

The presence that is with him—Satan, the devil, Luke seems to just refer to the presence as "he" in Greek—whispers to Jesus of his powerful abilities. You can perform miracles that give you everything you want. You can perform miracles that meet every basic need of the world. Turn all the stones to bread! You are an amazing preacher. You should be a celebrity. You should be a politician. You could run this whole city, whole region, whole empire. You can undo all of those unjust structures yourself. You can do anything. You don't have to suffer. You don't have to do this the hard way. You don't need these people to help you do the work. Just claim some of that power you know you have and soar right off of this cliff on angels' wings into the future you know you want.

As the exchanges go back and forth, Jesus matches the tempter's offers with scripture that centers and grounds him. Jesus tells the stories of his faith that remind him who he really is, who God really is, and what Jesus' purpose is as a teacher and preacher and prophet and healer and leader on earth.

It may be easy for us to read this story and think Jesus couldn't have been too tempted. He's Jesus, after all! Surely this story is thrown in to remind us that Jesus entered the wilderness like Moses and the Israelites entered the wilderness, right? We must read and realize temptation is ordinary and real for all of us. Jesus immediately goes from total self-knowledge to temptation of false self because that's the challenge every day of our lives. It is critical that we understand the temptations before Jesus are

not options he dislikes. Jesus is faced with options he has already imagined and considered. We are witnessing full humanity here as he struggles with how he will move forward in his ministry. Will it be by power? By ego? Or will it be in the smaller, harder, slower work of relationships, teaching, empowering others to follow him and watch what he is doing? Jesus knows the voice of temptation is not the voice of true self. He must remember who he is for his ministry, for his disciples, for you and for me. He must move through the wilderness into the fullness of his identity with clarity, vision, and a guiding intuition of what is right.

And lest we think Jesus mastered that lesson once and then moved on, Luke adds a whisper in verse 13, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." Jesus will have to remember again. Jesus will be tempted with other ways again. Jesus will have to return to the fullness of his identity again and again for his ministry, for his disciples, for you and for me.

Throughout these weeks of Lent, we have 40 days of practice on our own and six Sundays together. We are abstaining from habits or activities that limit our human experience or keep us from the fullest expression of ourselves. We are taking on practices and ways that draw us toward a fuller expression of ourselves, closer to one another, closer to God. These practices may challenge our fears, put us face to face with our doubts and selfish hopes, or poke holes in limitations we have named that aren't really there.

Our confession and acts of worship are rooted in gratitude. We remember who God is and what God has done, and we say thank you. We look at the abundance of our lives—the luxury of time and freedom, the excess of resources, the giftedness of our unique personalities—and we give the very best of that to God in acts of ministry, investment in relationships, and for the good of God's work in the world. We face darkness and temptation head on and reject everything that is not who we were really created to be. We walk away with clarity and vision. We remember who we are for our lives, for each other, for God's purposes in the world. This is the work of Lent. May we face the wild journey together. Amen.