

With All Your Heart
“God’s Generous Heart”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

First fruits and Tithes

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, 2. take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name 3 and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us." 4 The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. 5 Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. 6 But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. 7 Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. 8 So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. 9 He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; 10 and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me." Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. 11 And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

What is Lent supposed to remind us of?

I mentioned at the Ash Wednesday service that this is a 40 day season of preparation. For the early Christians it was a time of preparation for initiation into the church with sacrament of Holy Baptism. And for those who had committed serious sins (wonder if a modern day list of *those* would be any different?) could be re-instated with their family of faith.

In the early church or today’s Christian journey, we’re all to be listening to the call to return to God.

Wednesday night we heard verses from the OT prophet Joel who wrote God saying “*Return to me with all your heart.*” Those words aren’t JUST for ancient people!

The historical disciplines of being repentant, of self-denial, of prayer and fasting are admittedly heavy. Wednesday night I suggested that an alternative (or addition) to those disciplines be **that we pause**. Pause to be in each moment; with each person God has put in our way for whatever reason; to refocus our priorities and “return to God.”

I think we can all honestly say it wouldn't hurt us a bit to make THAT effort, but today's reading is a stop on the journey where we pause and practice thankfulness for God's gifts.

We're crossing the threshold of the open door that God has invited us through and in doing so we're kind of “reenacting” the ancient Israelites preparing to cross into the Promised Land.

'cause just as God provided protection and provision to those people, God, while waiting for us to “return with all [our] hearts”, is providing the same for us.

And just like the Israelites, who brought their offerings, we can respond with our thankfulness and grateful hearts for what God has provided FOR us all along.

Doesn't quite seem Lent-like, does it...to celebrate and be thankful rather than be weighed down as many people find Lent to be?

Moses is instructing God's Chosen People of what they are to do as they march into their God-given promised land.

They've been away, a long time, in Egypt where they became oppressed. Then, they wandering in the desert for 40 more years – all the while being fed and protected as they were getting ready to enter the land which God had for them all along.

Moses wants the people to remember God's generosity and that throughout their adversity, that there had been provision – which is a really good reason to celebrate.

Well Dear Ones, we've been wandering, some of us a long time, too.

And we have reason to celebrate.
God knew – has always known – what we needed.
And God provided it...or rather provided him, Jesus.

See, Lent isn't just a time to give up whatever distracts us from God.
It's also a time to get up and follow him.
It's God's way of preparing us....and the time for us to recognize where we've come from and where we're going. Lent is our time to remember, before we march into our "promised land," of eternal life with Jesus, to remember the gift God has given us OF Jesus.

Not only have our sins been erased, but Jesus walked among humanity to SHOW us, by example, what God's love-in-action looks like.
I don't believe that God's gift of Jesus, to be our Savior, was **just** about the agonizing crucifixion and death for our sins.

Jesus' whole life was a gift!

When you go home today, take a look at the lectionary gospel reading, which is Luke 4:1-13, the temptation of Jesus.

See, God's generous heart wasn't just for the people COMING HOME to the promised land.
God's generous heart also gave us the example of Jesus' life and work among us.

And, for Lent 2019, Jesus' work actually gifts us, again and again, with lessons where we get to see God's plan of redemption fulfilled.

What are some of the things Jesus teaches us?

Well, first, we're supposed to imitate Jesus...even in the radical things he did.
He sacrificed. He was hungry.
Scripture says in Luke 9 (22-24) that "*The Son of Man must suffer many things*"
And he did.
Not just hunger, but persecution, rejection, and death.

Jesus also said, "*If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.*"

Now, I'll admit that I/we tend to want to imitate Jesus in ways that appeal to us. We pick and choose the parts of his life we will imitate based on our own comfort and sense of what's important.

It could be silly, like:

Jesus loved fish, I should eat more fish.

Or Jesus took time to rest, and so, I need take time to rest.

Or, on the more serious side, there's giving to the poor or showing compassion - which IF we pause and think about it, *REALLY* aren't out of our comfort zones.

It's not that there is anything wrong with those things, but we need to look carefully and see if our "being just like Jesus" stops there, and doesn't go further into areas that are uncomfortable to us.

Jesus did fast and pray throughout his ministry.
He did deny himself. He did sacrifice everything.

Are **we** willing to go beyond the "comfortable level" of self-sacrifice in order to imitate Jesus more closely?

As we prepare for Easter, in these 40 days, does the thought of "taking up the cross daily" make us, even slightly, uncomfortable?

Perhaps it is God's call to serve in new (at least to us) ways that is nudging us OUT of comfort to a greater blessing of God's provision.

I gotta tell you, I didn't know what to expect last Wednesday when we did ashes in the parking lot.

Ann and Ruth took time off from work to be here so I felt their enthusiasm.

But I sure didn't know that stepping out of our comfort zone...

...to stand outside...

...to invite people OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONES to walk or drive onto our parking lot and receive ashes on their foreheads or hands...

...was going to feel so good...

...and how we'd be SO affirmed that we were really seeing *what God's trying to do* through us.

Talk about blessings from God!

I didn't know whether to fall to my knees to pray with gratitude (which I did later) or dance around with giddiness (which I didn't)! Okay – I'm still giddy.

If God's nudging YOU...embrace the opportunity!

You don't know what God's provision will be UNTIL you do!

Now, IT IS **highly** likely that self-denial will result in some extra time on our hands.

If we give up shopping...

...or computer time or TV...any indulgence, we'll probably discover just how much time we've been wasting.

So, could we be willing to spend some of that time in self-examination?

It says in 2 Corinthians (13:5):

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test?"

We need to spend time with God examining what kind of people we are and sometimes that's with brutal honesty!

Sometimes we need to stop kidding ourselves and recognize how much we're **REALLY** contributing - to our marriages and families, to the Body of Christ, the Church, and to our community.

Really look.

We always like good feedback – even in self-examination.

But, this Lent, let's step out of our comfort zones and look for the true motivations for the things we do.

And then recall that **WHAT** we do with our blessings, is in **RESPONSE** for what God has already done (and continues to do) for us.

Are we really good at what we're doing?
And what do we need to change to be better?

The psychologist who coined the term "competency" used an iceberg to make his point.

According to Dr. MacCleland, competency goes further than just our basic skills and what we know. That's just the "tip" of the iceberg.

The rest of the iceberg includes our values, self-image, and our motivations. Our behavior is a lot more than the tip of the iceberg!

It's the same when we call ourselves followers of Jesus.

No doubt, others look at our behavior to see what's different in us.

They measure our Christianity by the way we behave.

But hear this: Christianity has a lot more "iceberg" than outward behavior, it's also about the condition of our hearts.

And **THE** heart, that we can't forget about, is God's.

We have to remember Moses' words in Deuteronomy – especially the words towards the end of today's reading: "Don't forget Who brought you to this point."

Yes, self-denial and self-examination and prayer and fasting...

...but also gratitude and thankfulness for God who gives us the blessings and the bounty.

And then our "competency" (our **WHOLE** iceberg if you will) at being a follower of Jesus Christ, who with his self-sacrifice has saved us, - our competency will become abundantly apparent in our outward behavior because of the inward changes in us.

Let's prepare our hearts for Easter, these 40 days, by setting aside time for self-examination and then where necessary, repentance and change.

But, also for setting aside time to be thankful and filled with gratitude that overflows to others.

The offering we bring – like the Israelites of old brought their first fruits - will be OURSELVES. Present yourself and be thankful for the generosity of God's heart.

Amen.