

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (Alter, Robert *The Five Books of Moses*)

And it shall be, when you come into the land that the Lord your God is about to give you in estate, and you take hold of it and dwell in it, you shall take from the first yield of all the fruit of the soil that you will bring from your land which the Lord your God is about to give you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God chooses to make His name dwell there. And you shall come to the priest who will be in those days, and you shall say to him, **“I have told today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give to us.”** And the priest shall take the basket from your hand and lay it down before the altar of the Lord your God. And you shall speak out and say before the Lord your God: **“My father was an Aramean about to perish, and he went down to Egypt, and he sojourned there with a few people, and he became there a great and mighty and multitudinous nation. And the Egyptians did evil to us and abused us and set upon us hard labor. And we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our abuse and our trouble and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and with portents. And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, look, I have brought the first yield of the fruit of the soil that You gave me, Lord.”** And you shall lay it down before the Lord your God, and you shall bow before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the bounty that the Lord your God has given you and your household, you and the Levite and the sojourner who is in your midst.

An Aramean About to Perish

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 24, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When we last left the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, Jacob was aging and his young son, his favorite son Joseph was exasperating his older brothers. They were sick and tired of Daddy's boy. The story is familiar to you. Joseph's brothers decide to get rid of him. They finally decide not to kill him outright. Rather than murder him, they throw him into a deep empty cistern. When a caravan comes by, the brothers decide to sell Joseph. With that Joseph he is carried off to Egypt. His brothers take Joseph's infamous coat that his father gave him and soak it in animal blood; they present the coat to Jacob who surmises that his son has been torn apart by wild beasts; and Jacob goes into the inconsolable mourning of a grief stricken father. That concludes the story of the Patriarchs in Canaan.

The story then turns to Joseph in Egypt. We'll go back and pick up the tale in Egypt in all its wonderful parts in future sermons. For today's purpose we can note that Joseph became a famous success in Egypt. His brilliance at interpreting dreams warned the Egyptians of an upcoming famine, and because of him they saved up great surpluses in storehouses in preparation for the lean years.

The famine comes, but the Egyptians have plenty to eat. But that is not the case for the people of Canaan, who did not have the benefits of Joseph's warning. There the people are starving. A group of men arrives at the Egyptian court from Canaan to ask for help, and lo and behold, they turn out to be Joseph's brothers. After all these years, they do not recognize Joseph, probably in part because they never dreamed Joseph would hold an important office in the Egyptian government. But Joseph recognizes his brothers. However, Joseph doesn't let on for quite awhile, and this is another story we will want to enjoy later on. Finally, though, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, they reconcile, and they bring old Jacob and the whole family to Egypt to live. When the book of Genesis ends all is well. It concludes with Joseph's death at a ripe old age; all of the family tensions have been dissolved.

The book of Exodus begins many years later. In verse 8 of the first chapter Exodus is one of the most elegant understatements in all the Bible. "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph." The eons of time had rumbled on. All that Joseph had done for Egypt, all his fame and his high government position were lost in the mists of time, forgotten. "There arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph." Never did such a sweet sounding declaration portend such disaster. The Israelites, Joseph's descendents, were enslaved, put under hard labor, and oppressed.

After many years of this treatment, finally God leads the people out of Egypt. They spend forty years of wandering in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Moses, their leader, never gets the Promised Land himself, but toward the end of the book of Deuteronomy he gives the people instructions about how they are to live once they arrive. Among these instructions are found this morning's passage, instructions about bringing the first fruits of the harvest to God in remembrance and thanksgiving.

“My father was an Aramean about to perish, and he went down to Egypt, and he sojourned there with a few people, and he became there a great and mighty and multitudinous nation. And the Egyptians did evil to us and abused us and set upon us hard labor. And we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our abuse and our trouble and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and with portents. And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, look, I have brought the first yield of the fruit of the soil that You gave me, Lord.”

This week, of course we celebrate Thanksgiving. We set aside this Thursday in the late autumn to express our gratitude for our abundance. Here in New England we trace Thanksgiving back to the celebration the Pilgrims and Native Americans held at Plymouth Plantation in 1621. But Virginia, Florida and Texas all lay claim to even earlier dates. In the hearts of most Americans Plymouth wins the PR contest, I think. But in the end it doesn't really matter. In fact the multiple claims to Thanksgiving's origins serve to emphasize the human inclination to give thanks for bounty. And we are especially drawn to the harvest, even in our urban lives, as though something deep inside us knows that our existence depends on the fall crop, that our very being is as fragile as the fortune of the seasons.

As in many places in the agricultural ancient world, in Canaan this cyclical pattern of the seasons and harvest, and their bearing on life and death, became associated with local deities of fertility. These deities, Baal and Ashtart, regulated the sun and the rain and the fruitfulness of the land. The worship of the Canaanites, we are told, developed largely into a religion of appeasement of these deities so that the crops would flourish and the people would survive another year. The golden calf or bull and other figures of fertility represented these deities.

But what's interesting is that the God of Israel wants nothing to do with these deities and representations. God told the Israelites that these deities were nothing but idols. Now, this seems pretty confusing, doesn't it? Let's look at what we know. There seems to be a deep human understanding that life is held by a thread. That thread has everything to do with the agricultural cycles. Without the harvest we are finished. Gratitude, thanksgiving and a sigh relief are natural and appropriate in the face of the harvest abundance. And so is it natural to worship the divine forces that keep these seasons and processes in harmony. And the Israelites are instructed to bring the first fruits of the harvest in thanksgiving. But they are also explicitly told to avoid the worship of the deities of the seasons and fruitfulness. Or said another way, the God of Israel says, “I am not a God of seasons and agricultural cycles and successful crops.” And the inescapable question is, why not? What's wrong with that? It sounds a lot like Thanksgiving.

But the God of Israel says, “I am not a God of seasons and agricultural cycles and successful crops,” or at least that's but a part of what I am.

My guess is that God wants us to draw our gratitude from a broader spectrum and paint our worship on a broader canvas. God is afraid that our gratitude can become self-centered when we take a good harvest as a sign that we have pleased God. God is afraid it becomes, I received good; I must deserve it. Remember the Pharisee in the story a few weeks ago—O God, thank you that I'm righteous and blessed, not like that deadbeat over there, who obviously does not please you, O God. The Israelites in the desert thought only of themselves, to the point that God wanted to do them in more than once. That's why God kept them out there for forty years. That's why they begged Aaron to make them the golden bull—things aren't going good for us; let's get a bull and see if we can turn things around. Let us bow down to the bull. Maybe that will please God.

No, God wants to work on a bigger canvas than the canvas of our self-centeredness. God wants to be more than a God petty what have you done for me lately kind of God. God wants to paint on something broader than the canvas of the last harvest cycle, and God wants to paint on something broader than individual success. God wants to work on a canvas so wide it includes the whole people and so expansive that it incorporates the people's whole history. God wants to take the notion that the whole world refers to me and replace it with the idea that my vision is to take in the whole world.

And so God instructs the farmer to say, "My father was an Aramean about to perish." My father was not a person. My father was a people—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Lea and Rachel, and Joseph and a hundred generations in between. My father is like the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky. My father is legion. My father's history is long and manifold. And who am I, then? I am not just me, but I am my neighbor, my brother my sister, the sojourner, the stranger. I am every descendent of my father, and every descendent of my father is me.

And when the farmer comes and says, "My father was an Aramean about to perish," he speaks about and for a whole people. We hear of fear of famine, of perishing, but is not just my personal worry about this year's crop. This is the story of all of us who live, who have ever lived and who shall ever live. The story told that way makes it harder to carve out our own personal little piece of well-protected turf, against which we defend ourselves from others. The story is bigger than we are. Or said another way, we are bigger than any self-centered story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

When we say that our father was an Aramean about to perish, we are talking about something even bigger than the famine of Jacob's nuclear family. We are talking about a whole people in bondage in Egypt. If we thought it was bad hanging by the thread of this year's crop, God wants us to understand that it was much more tenuous than that. The whole people of God was in danger of perishing, and the only thing that prevented it was that when "we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers ... the Lord heard our voice and saw our abuse and our trouble and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm ... and He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, look, I have brought the first yield of the fruit of the soil that You gave me, Lord." The farmer brings the first fruits not so much because God made this year's crop bountiful, but because God saved the people, brought the people out of Egypt and gave them this land, this land which flows with milk and honey.

In this marvelous ritual God gathers up two vital threads and entwines them into the strong rope of Israelite religion. We would have perished were it not for God. And the 'we' in that sentence is broadly inclusive. It is captured in the last line of this morning's reading: "And you shall rejoice in all the bounty that the Lord your God has given you and your household, you and the Levite and the sojourner who is in your midst." The Israelites come, then, each year with the first fruits not focused on God's beneficence in this year's agricultural cycle, but on God's beneficence in saving us from perishing and giving us this land, this life. And when we lift up the first fruits of the harvest, we are reminded that once we were about to perish, we were strangers and sojourners in Egypt. And we are reminded that the sojourner and the stranger today, the person in danger of starving, or freezing—of perishing—is not only with us and in need of our help, but also is simply us in a place that we once were. God wanted to be sure that the people in the Promised Land, the people enjoying that milk and honey, would never forget from where they came and that they would never forget that every person in need, every stranger and

sojourner, is a blood relative whom we must strive to treat as God has treated us. For, when we were about to perish, “We cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice.” The Lord heard our voice. For that we come in thanks. Amen.