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## “An Inheritance and a Responsibility”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
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The book of Deuteronomy concludes what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the OT. Deuteronomy records the orations of Moses to the Israelites on the last day of his life. For a man who was “slow of tongue,” Moses sure had a lot to say. Our text comes near the end of the longest of Moses’ speeches (which runs from Deuteronomy. chapters 5-26. That’s a 21-chapter speech, for those of you who are counting). If we read the whole thing, we’d be here all day – I opted for a shorter segment. You’re welcome.

Moses’ speeches tend to dwell on three themes:

1. the covenant God has established with the Israelites in the wilderness;
2. the laws of the covenant;
3. the necessity of obedience to those laws as the condition for enjoying the benefit of the covenant.<sup>1</sup>

What we are about to hear is a theological interpretation of the summer harvest. At the harvest, the best agricultural produce was brought to the temple as an offering to God. This “land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 9) was not theirs to own, but an “inheritance to possess” (v. 1, as verse 1 is about to tell us). Let’s listen for Moses’ words to the people:

### Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.” <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>you

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<sup>1</sup> William Yarchin. “Commentary on Deuteronomy 26:1-11.” *Working Preacher*. WorkingPreacher.org. 21 Feb. 2010. Web. 28 Jan. 2018.

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. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.

Symbolic actions upon entering a new land are not all that foreign to us. We’ve seen scenes of returned soldiers and POWs kissing the ground when they land back on American soil. Such images seem to imagine that there were some sort of personal relationship with the land. Historically, we recognize settlers or conquerors planting a flag and somehow claiming ownership of a new land. (Or Buzz Aldrin staking the American flag on the surface of the moon.)

The actions described in Deuteronomy 26 are different from these kinds of behaviors. What Deuteronomy describes does not take place upon setting foot on the new land, but only after the people have settled and begun to reap the land’s good benefits. As soon as this happens – as soon as the land is tamed and harvested – each member or each family representative is to take some of the first fruit of the produce from the land and bring it before the Lord in the sanctuary. This action has nothing to do with a connection or personal relationship to the ground, nor does it represent any kind of claim over the land.<sup>2</sup> This action is all about an act of gratitude for God’s good gift. It acknowledges that the land and all that is in it come from the Lord as an undeserved and unearned gift. As Patrick Miller puts it, to say “I have come into the land” is equivalent to saying “I have received the gift.”<sup>3</sup> It is reminiscent of the old favorite, the Johnny Appleseed blessing, where one sings, “O, the Lord’s been good to me, and so I thank the Lord.” God gives; we give thanks.

Moses’ instructions remind the people – remind us – that our own generosity is grounded in God’s generosity with us. We give because we remember how God gave us a way into the covenant. For Christians, that means that among countless other good gifts, God gave us Jesus Christ to live, suffer, die, rise from the dead and ascend to heaven. When we share our affirmation of faith each week, as we recited together the Apostles’ Creed a few moments ago, we are doing what Moses is calling the Israelites to do – to remember what they believe, and what good thing (the covenant) God has given them.

The generations after slavery in Egypt and 40 years in the desert won’t remember the hardship their ancestors went through firsthand. Deuteronomy knows that when a people forget their past, they lose their present and their future.

In Deuteronomy, we are invited to overhear the story of our earliest ancestors in the faith. We are encouraged to remember that even then, when “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (v. 5), God was at work to gather and claim a people. God was seeking even then to redeem us and call us each by name. There are other stories we are called to remember as well. There are the stories of other Old Testament figures that testify to God’s love and deliverance. We hear the stories of Daniel, Nehemiah, Deborah, and Jonah – and they become our story. There are the stories of the New Testament, and encounters with God’s Word made flesh. We hear the stories of the disciples,

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick D. Miller, Jr. *Interpretation, Deuteronomy*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Gerasene demoniac, of the lepers, of the paralytic man, of Zacchaeus, and of Lazarus and Mary and Martha – and they become our story. We hear the stories of the early church in the book of Acts, and the stories of each church that has proclaimed the truth of Christ since the day of Jesus’ resurrection – and they become our stories.

When the Israelites recite Moses’ words in the Temple, they are sharing not only a creed, but also their story.

In her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christina Pohl shares the story of her grandmother. “I was an orphan at thirteen. No one should ever be alone.” Pohl writes that these two simple sentences provided a window into her 91-year-old grandmother’s determination that the family would, once again, take Christmas dinner to an elderly acquaintance who lived several towns away. Pohl writes:

“For all of her long life, my grandmother welcomed countless acquaintances as strangers, but never before had she or I connected this consistent practice of hospitality to her own childhood experience of having been left alone, raised in an unfamiliar and sometimes unkind household. Her distant but still vivid memory of having been an orphan and a stranger sustained a lifelong passion for hospitality.”<sup>4</sup>

Whenever the family objected to having to make these trips to share food, or when they impatiently tried to remind their grandmother that this or that old friend or neighbor always had plenty to eat, Pohl’s grandmother expressed a fundamental truth: “The experience of having been a stranger, or of being a vulnerable person on the margins of society, is often connected with offering hospitality” in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

The events that happen to us in our past shape us in both recognizable and unrecognizable ways. When we reflect on our history (individual and shared) we can gain wisdom and an appreciation for past struggles. When we do not recount or learn from the past, we are, more often than not, doomed to repeat it.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent provide opportunities for God’s people to gather and remember our shared story. This season invites us to take stock of our lives and remember the hard truth that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Heidi Neumark shares that in Spanish, the word for parish is *parroquia*, from the Greek root *paroikia*. *Paroikia* indicates a place of exile, a place where you might find a stranger (*paroikos*). She writes that our parishes, our local churches, are meant to be places of hospitality for the *stranger*.<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy tells of God’s migrant people on the verge of crossing into the Promised Land. They are given a lengthy set of instructions meant to guide them as they settle down. The text we read warns of the danger that comes when sojourners settle. The grave danger is that the people will settle for something less than the vision and hope for liberation and justice that led them there in the first place. As it turned out, those who entered the land did eventually settle for their own well-being, overlooking the dispossessed and disconnected. Deuteronomy’s call to remember their connection to those who continue to be landless (the Levites) and those who continue to live as resident aliens is a call to return to the people God has called them to be. It is a call to practice living as God’s chosen people.

We run the same risk today. We are, largely speaking, a wealthy and comfortable nation. Despite our prosperity as a wealthy nation, however, anxiety and fear are real for our nation’s people. We forget who we are as God’s people first. Conversations with friends and church

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<sup>4</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> Neumark, Heidi, "Aliens Welcome," *The Christian Century*, 2007.

members remind me just how rudderless many feel. Too often, our leaders tell us that our situation as Americans is a special blessing from God. We forget that with any blessing comes great responsibility. We have inherited much – our nation's forefathers and our families ancestors much likely toiled harder than we have ever had need to. *If* ours is a rich inheritance, then our responsibility is all the greater.

In the Old Testament, the Levites were the priestly class – they didn't own any property. They had no place to grow produce and provide for themselves. The aliens, the visitors and strangers among the Israelites, likewise had no property to share. Moses commands the Israelites to share their abundance with them – to remember where they came from, and that God was once, and continues to be, generous with them.

Keep at it, Moses is saying. Don't forget who you are and where you come from. All that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. It wasn't earned, it was given. Take care of one another, and continue the work God has given you to do.

Honey bees were among the first symbols adopted by Christians. To them, the ardent activity of beehives suggested the work of the church. The hibernation in colder months suggested the resurrection. Honey was a symbol of abundant new life in Christ. We have a great responsibility to create and offer a place for future generations to worship in safety and community, but also to return some of what God has given.

In the season of Lent, may we listen more closely to the stories. May we open God's Word and our hearts to hear what God is telling us. As we grow closer to Easter, to that glorious day of resurrection, we are charged to remember that Jesus took the desert route. Despite his own danger (and even given the moment when he could have chosen to opt out), he pushed on toward what he knew lay ahead.

Friends, may we worship through these stories. May these weeks ahead be a time to prepare our hearts to celebrate the greatest gift we have received – God made flesh, Jesus Christ, given for us that we might live.