

“O Lord, you are our refuge;
our dwelling place and shelter.

Show us your salvation.” AMEN!

Why not do something new
at the beginning of Lent?

Each year these forty days from Ash Wednesday
to Easter get filled with grand ideas about
giving things up or doing new things,
and there’s nothing wrong with that.

Bad habits can be broken during Lent and
good habits can be planted in Lent.

It might also be new to see that when Jesus
was led into the wilderness to fast and
be tempted by the devil,
his identity and his vocation was tested.

With his baptism in the rear view mirror,
the devil wanted to know
what kind of a Son of God was this
Jesus going to be?

So the devil tested him to find out.

And “when he finished every test,”
the last verse said,
“the devil departed from Jesus until
an opportune time.”

That means Jesus’ testing was not complete.

The devil would return, but there’s an
in-between time for Jesus. (Pause)

Consider where we are:
Epiphany has past us, and Easter on its way,
Lent is the living into this time of “in-between.”

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the in-between,
but the season began on Ash Wednesday
when we smeared ashes on our foreheads
to recall our mortality.

“Remember that you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

There’s deep ritual here to follow lest
we lose our ability to stay grounded.

We are mindful about our connection to the earth,
and as told in Deuteronomy, that
we are immigrants and outsiders. (Pause)

So, a little something new that we
will do today is to take the words of
Deuteronomy 26 and recognize
the liturgical theatre it provided
for the Israelites.

“Each year when the harvest begins,
farmers are told to gather a basket full of
the first fruits of the harvest and present
it to God at the place of worship.”

First, it says, is to declare that
they're immigrants and strangers to the land
where they live.

That's an easy one since that first generation was,
but if one was born there, after
their parents moved into the land,
they're still recognized and are
to consider themselves as outsiders
to the land.

This ceremonial declaration was not a reaction
to earthly citizenship as they pertain
to nations today.

It's not something that should be used
against welcoming foreigners and immigrants.

It was a ritual that reminded them,
and each generation that came after,
that the land on which they live
will never actually
belong to them.

They were tenants that cared for the land,
but the land itself belonged to God.

Now this kind of thinking is hard
for us “landowning” Americans, but
hear the text out.

As they depended on the land for survival
and depended on God for the land,
so do we.

We too are stewards of the land.

When they presented a basket from
the first harvest before God’s altar and
declared their immigrant identity,
and worshipped,

they were not to think that their enjoyment of
the harvest or the land for that matter,
was inevitable.

They were not to take it all for granted.

My house is not my reward, nor is your
residence your reward, it's to be seen
as a gracious gift from God. (Pause)

This ritual script from Deuteronomy was
to be a memory aid for fueling humility
and gratitude to God for the
gift of life and sustenance.

We, and they, can learn a lot about our world
and the way it is right now when we recognize
the ways we've forgotten this covenant
ritual and take for granted
what we think we own. (Pause)

And, Lent is a timely season to
be reminded of the truth.

As Israel was reminded to give first fruits, and
invited to recall their immigrant status, so are we.

Lent reminds us how we are all grounded in
God's grace and entirely dependent upon
God for survival. (Pause)

It goes further, the next part of the ceremony
required each worshipper to recite
the community's historical memory of

God's saving action.

For the Israelites, that was their rescue
from Egypt and the bondage of slavery there
and then entry into the land of promise.

“Recite the history,” the text says.

When we neglect to recall and recite our history,
we settle in with the false truth that
the land always belonged to us, or

that we “earned it” somehow,
or that God bestowed it to us and
then we conclude that we
can therefore lock others out.

It reminds me of when we gather around
the table for Communion.

We come with an empty, but open hand
and receive the free gift.

That “on the night in which he was betrayed,
Jesus took bread... and took the wine
and gave thanks.”

What Jesus received,
He gave to all of them.

Each time we gather around the altar
we vocalize the history of God's saving act
and God's saving grace given on
humanity's behalf.

We don't deserve it, own it, nor
do we take it for granted.

We pass it on.

Through these rituals we become
mystically connected to the disciples and
to the church triumphant.

Invited to the table to be with Jesus,
both metaphorically and somehow very real.

We are there; Jesus is here. (Pause)

These remembrances, the ones
told in Deuteronomy and in our gospel
this morning communicate our
communal identity.

Their wandering Aramean was Jacob.

Our wandering Galilean is Jesus.

They parallel one another in the ritual of
the telling of the story.

We become formed by their participation.

In our participation, we inherit the same liberation
as people rescued by God and
stewards of the Way. (Pause)

When I think of Jesus in the wilderness,
fasting and being tested,
pondering the way he did it alone.

I wonder would I be able to resist
the devil's testing the same way Jesus did?

Would any of us be able?

I doubt it very much.

We are not very resistant to the devil's tests.

Even as a church, we'd fail -
for we wish we could feed everyone
by turning stones into bread.

We desire to take the offer of power because we
could help so many people if we
just had more power.

And, what about safety?

Oh my, if we were guaranteed safety
think of the risks we could take! (Pause)

Thankfully, Jesus knew that all of the devil's tests
were precisely what it means to NOT
be Christ/Messiah.

The pinnacle of the Gospel is not power,
security, and endless food.

The pinnacle of the Gospel is that
Jesus will suffer and die.

He must succumb to the powers of gravity,
hunger, and defeat otherwise Messiah is
not one of us at all.

But that's all to come later.

This is the in-between time and in it
we celebrate by giving back to God a portion
of what is entrusted to us.

And we will care for the poor and
for the vulnerable throughout the year as
we put special focus during Lent on

prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent.

AMEN!