

Remembering Where We've Been
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
First Sunday in Lent
Woodbury UMC
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A couple of years ago, I was appointed to a different congregation, and at that point I was still finishing up seminary. I was the junior guy. One week, the person I was working with wasn't there, they had something else that they needed to do, so I was running worship solo that week. I stood in the back and I greeted people as they would come in, and a couple of them said "So you're in charge today." I replied "Yes, today I am in charge here."

The power went out for about five minutes.

And then it came back on, and everything was fine, but I am more cautious with the words that I use when I describe my function in the Lord's house.

It is God's house, and I have some authority for a time, with full knowledge that there will come a time when I no longer have authority here. The question that will be asked of me, will be what did I do with it when I had the chance? All of you have been here longer than me, which means the exact same question is asked of you. Ask by who? Maybe by those who come after you, those who will join a month a year a decade or more from now. Maybe one day by God. Some of you are trying to figure out where I'm going with this, and noting that this sounds very

much like a stewardship sermon. It is, in a sense. But I'm not after your money. I'm after your imaginations.

When we become professing members of a United Methodist congregation, we profess our faith in God, our desire to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, and our commitment to join with our church community to keep the vows of our Baptismal Covenant. One of those vows is to faithfully participate in the life and ministries of our local congregation through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. How can we go beyond the words we profess to actually living into these vows? The trick is that there is no step by step guide on how to do this. It is up to each congregation, and up to each person, to figure it out. I have some ideas I'd like to share with you. It is Lent, a time of deep reflection and a time of preparation. We are a people rooted in resurrection, rebirth, and new life. So how do we live that out? I'm going to have a few things to say about that, and there are a couple of thing I as that you do, too.

Here's your part: Pray. Let's use this Lenten season to pray for each other — as people, as Methodists, and as a congregation. If that makes you uncomfortable, here's a secret — you can pray for help in praying. It isn't like genie wishes, where you can't wish for more wishes, or your wishes will be answered in a horrible and ironic fashion. Pray for help praying and see what happens. If you want company, pray with us before worship each week during Lent.

The next part is to spend some time in scripture. We've just sent out a devotional that combines scripture with reflections by people from the WUMC community. After being isolated for two years, it is great to

reconnect through scripture. If you like what someone has said about a scripture, I urge you to tell them — some of us feel like our thoughts might not be good enough, or learned enough. Trust me, if you tell someone if their thoughts on scripture connected with you, it will make their day. If you want company, I urge you to join one of the two Bible studies that considers the week's scripture and message as a starting point before venturing deeper. Join me Wednesday in the assembly room, or participate via zoom Tuesday evenings.

There is one more part. Methodists have two sacraments, understood as means of grace. In John Wesley's words, Holy Communion is "an act of worship ordained by Christ" and a means of grace. This does not mean that we become more worthy of God's grace by participating in Communion. Rather, we open ourselves to the divine love that is already there; we become more ready to receive that love and to respond to it. So we will share communion each Sunday during Lent, to ready us to receive God's love, and help us to respond to God's love. The way we decide to respond to God's love, both as individuals and as a congregation, will determine what comes next for WUMC.

You may be asking yourself — pastor, why start a Lenten focus without a Gospel? Why are we in Deuteronomy? Good question.

Deuteronomy is offered as something of a valedictory speech for Moses, a summation of all that has come before offered at the end of his life. What came before are four books of history and prehistory, a lot of rules and regulations, specifics on how to live. What we have in today's reading is a great mix of the two. The text gives instructions on the

appropriate way to bring one's offering of a share of one's yield to the priest, to be correctly offered to the Lord. The instructions are pretty specific in what's expected. Remember, this is supposed to be a speech from Moses at the end of his life, on the cusp of the people who have been wandering the wilderness for 40 years to enter the land that had been promised to their forebears. They are being commanded to enter the land, to cultivate the land, and to give thanks to God. From there, it gets into when you are supposed to hand over your offering, what the priest is to do — and what you are to say.

“My father was a starving Aramean” — what a great opening line! It has drama, history, and just a little shocking. Arameans are largely enemies in later times, so this is a rather self-effacing way to begin as well. You get Hebrew history rendered in miniature here. Our forefathers went down to Egypt, they were enslaved, The Lord brought us out and took us to Israel, therefore I am bringing this offering to The Lord. The Aramean in question might be Abraham, or possibly Jacob. This is why it sounds like a stewardship sermon, because we are being reminded that everything we are and everything we have, we owe to the goodness of God who has given it to us. (The verb in the original language is somewhat ambiguous, could be wandering, or starving, or about to die.)

We are also being reminded that the Lord's goodness extends to our ancestors, and that the promises of God extend to the children of those who keep God's law — This is said while following specific instructions, this is a claim for the future as much as the past. It is a message about building a future based on the promises of the past, of those who came before us and their promises to God, and their hopes

that those promises would be fulfilled in their children and all those who came after them. This passage says 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. It sounds like we could tack on the words “and they all lived happily ever after” — but of course we know that things don’t go that way. This is not the end, but it does seem to be the end of one phase for the people, setting the stage for the next phase of their journey. To everything there is a season — here one season is ending as the next one takes shape.

A major part of this text is a memory of shared trauma. At a time of celebration—when people are called to rejoice at the blessing of another year’s harvest—there is a remembrance of slavery in Egypt, and how hard it was: they “treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,” and we went through “our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.” This seems like a good text for a congregation that has weathered years of pandemic, years of political upheaval, years of losing people, and even losing a beloved pastor. As we celebrate what we have and who we are, we reflect on what we went through to reach this point, and to give thanks to God for seeing us through.

I note that in celebrating with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, this scripture is specifically including those who are not of the tribe, those who do not have that shared history, those who may not even know the Lord — but they are present, and so they share in the bounty and the celebration. We are invited to celebrate and share with everyone, including those who are not like us. In this time when asylum seekers and refugees are routinely demonized as a filthy, criminal,

invading horde, this doesn't spell out how to respond — but it does spell out that when you thank God, they are to be a part of it, and that when you share your bounty, you are to remember that it all came from God, and to share with those that are new to you. After all, our ancestor was a starving Aramean, and we are not to forget our history. This passage shows thankfulness to God and care for the marginalized as the intertwined outcomes of their ongoing journey as a people.

This reading is a tremendous pivot. It remembers the past, and it then points to the future. It gives instructions on how you are to honor God, and how to worship God. It broadens the focus, from the family of one man, to that family becoming the Hebrew people, to even include care for the foreigner. We know that the story goes on from here, but it is a good thing to honor those who got us to this point, recognizing that the God that saw them through is the same God that will see us through, if we will only trust and obey. Lent is often characterized as a journey, and if that's the case, then it is a journey straight to the cross. We got to this point because God has seen us through, and we are here because there is still much work to be done.

For a little while, we are stewards of this time in the life of the Methodist wing of Christendom. Now what? We can see with unusual clarity that one chapter is winding down, with the next clamoring more and more loudly to be born. We Methodists are about to have every news outlet in the world paying attention to what's happening in our denomination, just for a minute. What do we want them to see when they focus on us?

One day we'll be asked what did **you** do while you had stewardship of it, maybe by God, maybe by those who come after us. I suspect both. That's where we are in our journey, at a time marking the end of something but the beginning of something else.

It's nearly time for us to share in communion, a mystery which has been celebrated in this space for almost two centuries. A mystery that joins us with Christians across time. A mystery that joins us with Christians around the world, including those being oppressed horribly. Including those who are ready to start a new chapter on their own. What is our appropriate reaction to all of that in this moment? As we come into a time of communion, let's listen. When you take the elements and go back to your seat, pray a little bit—God, what do you want? And then listen.

My prayer is that what comes out of this is a heart to love as God loves, eyes to have a vision of what the world could be as God sees it, and the courage to do the work to bring that world into existence.

May it be so. Amen.