

I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY

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Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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, 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. 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." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you 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. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 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. 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.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

One of the joys of being a grandparent is watching your adult child being a parent. It always amazes me because I really do think my sons are much better at it than I ever was. But there are some things that I know they learned from me. One skill that my sons have, that I will take credit for, is that they are good story tellers. Their daughters are enraptured when daddy tells them a story. And there is one very important trick that my sons learned from their father when it comes to storytelling and that is: when all else fails PLAGIARIZE.

I am very serious about this. When you are telling a five-year-old a story, there is no reason why you have to be original. You know far more stories than this child knows, far more than you realize. So borrow plots and storylines from novels you read, movies and plays you have seen, mythology, fairytales, whatever. After all,

there is no reason to give credit or footnote your sources. This is a child, not your college professor. Let her think you have thought up all these plot twists and great drama, yourself. Change a few details here and there. Put in her stuffed animal or the family pet as one of the characters, and she will think you are the most brilliant, clever spinner of tales that there ever was.

I remember one particular evening when I was putting my middle son, Jonathan, to bed. He was probably about 6 or 7 at the time, and he wanted me to tell him a story. I think I was a little tired that night and not at all inspired, so I said, "I will tell you the story of Romeo and Juliet." Jon made a face and said, "Yuck! That is a love story about kissing and stuff. I don't want to hear that story. Tell me another story."

I paused for a moment and then said, "Okay. I will tell you a completely different story about two gangs in New York City who hated each other and were always fighting. One gang was called the Sharks and the other gang was called the Jets." And I proceeded to tell him the tale of the musical *West Side Story*. Jon loved it! He thought it was one of the best stories I had ever told him. For days afterwards, he was running around the house with a table knife in his back pocket, pretending it was his switchblade and he was Biff or Tony or Bernardo. I think he was a freshman in high school before he figured out what I had done. And I decided right then and there that if Leonard Bernstein could plagiarize William Shakespeare, why couldn't I? In fact, I have made a profession out of plagiarizing. Week after week, I stand up here and tell you wonderful stories. Do you honestly think I made them up all myself? Of course not. It is only the very best stories that are told and retold over and over again. It is the old, old stories that are so powerful and affect our lives.

What I really am trying to say is that good storytelling is about making the story your own. Make it a story that means something to you, that touches you in some way. You may not have thought up the plot line, but somehow you allow yourself to be drawn in and it is no longer just a good story but it is your story. When that happens stories can change who we are and how we think about the world. There was a saying among the old Jewish rabbis as to why God took the trouble to create human beings. After all, we have been a problem since the very beginning. So why did God bother to create human beings? The rabbis said it was because God loves stories. And we are created in the image of God, so we love stories too. It is part of what makes us human. Psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists will tell you that story telling is a universal human trait. Everyone tells stories. Everyone enjoys not just listening to, but becoming part of a good story.

The stories you choose to listen to and the stories you claim as your own shape your life and change who you are. Both of our scripture lessons for this morning are important in themselves, but they also show the power of stories. The first passage we read from Deuteronomy might seem out of place for the first Sunday of Lent. The popular concept of Lent is that it is a time when you give up something. It is a time to rethink your New Year's resolutions you made back in January. If you are really going to do what you had said you were going to do, well now is the time to really get at it. However, if you read the whole 26th chapter of Deuteronomy, you will discover that the setting for this passage is a harvest celebration. These verses were read at the time of indulgence and plenty rather than at a time of giving up and doing without.

To really understand what this passage is all about, imagine a huge holiday meal; maybe a Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter dinner. There is a turkey or ham and then all the extras; the mashed potatoes and gravy, squash, vegetables, two or three types of salad, dinner rolls with real butter, along with olives and pickles. The family is sitting at the dinner table with the fine china and silver utensils. Everything smells delicious and everyone's mouth is watering. Grandpa picks up the carving knife and fork and is just about to start slicing up and serving the meal when he pauses. He says, "Before we do anything else, I need to tell you a story. My ancestor was an undocumented immigrant. He was always afraid of being caught and deported, so he kept on the move, working temporary jobs that no one else would take. Eventually he found work in Texas. There he married and raised a family. Unfortunately, we were share crop farmers and no matter how hard we worked, we were always in debt. We never owned anything, not even the pots we cooked with or the beds we slept in. We were often beaten and abused, but if we tried to complain in any way we were arrested and thrown in jail. But our faith was strong and we cried out to God. Our prayers were answered and through many amazing

circumstances, the Lord brought us here to this land. It wasn't heaven, but it was Iowa. Now look at this table, and as you enjoy all this wonderful food, you must remember all that God has done for you."

That is what this passage from Deuteronomy is all about. It is about telling the story of the community of faith and claiming it as your own. Centuries had passed since Moses led the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. They were no longer nomads, wandering around the Sinai Peninsula. They were now farmers with fields of grain, vineyards and orchards. They had built communities, even cities. They had established government and a religious system. They were located along important trade routes and so they were accumulating material possessions.

It would have been very easy to sit back, relax and just enjoy the good life, and actually many did just that. The problem was that under such circumstances it was also very easy to forget what defined them as a people as those whom God has called to be God's own. So they were instructed to tell the story, again and again, to tell the story to their children and grandchildren as part of their holiday celebrations. They were enjoying all these blessings, not because of anything they had done to deserve such goodness. They were blessed because God loved them and God had done wonderful things for them. That is the story they needed to tell. That is the story they needed to hear, over and over, again and again.

What's more this was not just a story about something that happened to someone else a long time ago in a faraway place. It was meant to be something very personal. You can see it in the grammar as the story was told. It begins, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien..." **HE** went down, third person singular. But the story shifts, "When the Egyptians treated us harshly, we cried to the Lord..." **WE** cried, first person plural. Then it shifts one more time: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." Not he or we, but **I** bring the first fruits; first person singular. This is my story. I am the one who was blessed by God. So I am grateful and I bring this offering to God. This is who I am. I am one of those God has delivered. This is my identity.

So let's move on to our second story for this morning. Now, if I say two words, "Jack" and "beanstalk," you know the story. If I say "hare" and "tortoise," you know the story. If I say "Washington" and "cherry tree," you know the story. The same is true for the fourth chapter of Luke. It opens with this line, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." The first ones who heard this text were Jews and all they had to hear were the words "wilderness" and "forty" and they knew the story. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor and he went down into Egypt..."

The early church, this new faith community, used this story to define who they were. Their ancestors entered into a new relationship with God through their forty years wandering in the wilderness. Now Jesus had ushered in an altogether new relationship with God and it began with forty days in the same wilderness.

We have all heard many sermons and Sunday School lessons about what the devil suggests Jesus can do. "If you really are the Son of God, then you should be able to turn these stones into bread..." "If you really are the Son of God, then you deserve all this power I can give you..." "If you really are the Son of God, then you must have angels protecting you..." Each of these suggestions has at its core a challenge to Jesus' true identity. In other words, the devil is trying to change the story.

The devil says, "I know the story you want to tell, Jesus. It is the story of God loving these pitiful human beings, loving them no matter how much it hurts God or hurts you. But let me tell you another story, Jesus. It is a story of power; power to care for yourself and then you will be able to care for others. It is the story of the power of wealth and possessions. It is the story about using your power to stay safe. This is a dangerous world, Jesus. All I am suggesting is that the ends justify the means. There is nothing wrong with taking a few precautions. Call on a few angels to watch your back. That is a much better story, isn't it, Jesus?"

Luke tells us that at this point Jesus was famished. He was hungry, weak, and exhausted. So did he try to come up with something new, innovative, clever and creative to counter this attack by the devil? Not at all. He retold the old, old stories; possibly the bedtime stories that Mary and Joseph had told him when he was a little boy. Each response he gives is from the book of Deuteronomy, where our first story is found. As he listened to all these other stories that the devil was trying to tell him, the ancient words kept echoing in his head, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor... The Egyptians treated us harshly but the Lord heard our cries and brought us out of bondage... The Lord God fed us with manna in the wilderness teaching us that one does not live by bread alone... The Lord God made a covenant with us that we might have no other Gods before him... The Lord God provided us with springs of water in the desert as a warning not to put God to the test... God did all these mighty things for one reason, and one reason only. It was because God loved us. It is an old, old story. But I love to tell this story. You are wasting your time, Satan! Nothing you have to offer compares in any way with this beautiful story.”

So here we are, once again in the season of Lent. It is a time as a community, but also on an individual basis we once more tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. So here is the question: What is your story? I ask that question because there are dark forces in this world who want to tell you different stories. These stories often begin with that same little word, “If...” Two thousand years ago, it was “If you are the Son of God...” Today these alternate stories come to us as: “If you really were Christian...” “If you had enough faith...” “If you had any intelligence at all...” “If you weren’t such a loser...” “If you weren’t so weak...” Day after day, week after week, those stories swirl around our heads and try to claim us. Lent is a time when we can stop listening to these stories and hear a different one.

I mentioned *West Side Story* at the beginning. I will close with a story from another old Broadway musical, one of my favorites, *The Man of La Mancha*. It is a play based on the story of Don Quixote by Miguel Cervantes. Don Quixote is an elderly Spanish nobleman, who loves old fantasy stories of knights and chivalry. These stories claim him so much so that, as it says in a line from the play, he “lays aside the burden of sanity.” He is flat out crazy, and dressing up in makeshift, home-made armor, he believes himself to be a heroic champion, mounted on a mighty charger. He goes off in search of adventures and in his travels he encounters a young woman named Aldonza. She is a bar maid and a prostitute, singing a song about how all men are the same to her, and for a price she will do whatever they want. But that is not how Don Quixote sees her. To him, she is a beautiful, highborn, virtuous lady, the symbol of the perfection of womanhood, who Don Quixote loves and calls Dulcinea. The name means “sweet one.” All this is met with much laughter and derision from the townspeople. But there is something about the old man’s stories of love that touch Aldonza in a way unlike anything she has experienced before.

At the end of the play, Don Quixote’s relatives and doctor force a cure on him, which does indeed restore his sanity, but also literally breaks his heart. He lies dying, and Aldonza comes to him. As he breathes his last, she tries to revive him by singing his song, “The Impossible Dream,” but it is too late. He is gone. Then someone breaks the silence by calling out to her, “Aldonza!” She pulls herself up proudly, holds her head high, and answers, “My name is Dulcinea!” For the first time she knows she is loved. She has claimed an old, old story as her own, and that changes everything.

Over and over again, the Spirit of God keeps telling us this old, old story. It is a story of how God once made us beautiful, and loved us, but somehow we lost our way. But God never stopped loving us, and God is continually at work to bring us back and restore us to the way we were. It is a story we tell throughout this season of Lent. It is a story that is worth listening to again and again. It is a story that we can claim as our own. It is a story that changes everything. Thank God, for this story. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.