

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“There Will Always be a Path”

The first in a Lenten Series on Spiritual Principles

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Luke 4: 1-13

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The Bible is such a fascinating book... and we read it and preach from it so selectively and with such predetermined agendas... that we often miss out on just how fascinating it is.

For instance, if you just read through Deuteronomy... I mean, next time it's cold and rainy, just grab Deuteronomy and curl up by the fire. It's fascinating what's in there. It's sort of a mix of story and practice, protocol and narrative...

So it's kind of like the book folks would turn to so they could answer the question, who are we and how are we to live in this new land? There's some rehearsal of the Exodus... kind of Cliff notes versions... and there are rules (some might say they're more like guidelines really) about how they were to live together.

And it's amazing what's in there....

All they were concerned with.

There are instructions on what to do in the new land if you happen to run across a pagan worship site. There are prohibitions against marking yourself or shaving your head... (Brandon – Daniel)

There are all sorts of dietary instructions...

You can eat deer but not camels...

You can eat white perch but not catfish...

Quail but not buzzards...

No insects... no road-kill.

And absolutely no young goat cooked in its mother's milk. Boy... nothing gets me more worked up than that.... I hate it when someone tries to serve me goat cooked in its mother's milk. This is just fascinating, and I mean that.

There are all sorts of interesting things. What kind of festivals to have and when to have them and how to go about throwing the party. How to appoint judges and kings... how to harbor refugees... how to go to war...

There's a thing about dealing with an “unsolved murder.” It's kind of a CSI Jericho... There's a pretty strong word as to how to deal with a wife who gets a little too “aggressive” trying to interfere in the fight her husband is in (make sure to see 25:11... maybe use it for a Lectio).

There's a very important section on compensating the clergy. And I want to make sure that we're people of the book here.

First of all, if you are sacrificing a bull... make sure you take your priest one of the shoulders and all the internal organs... UMMMMMM. The Living Bible translates that, **“If you kill a buck this season, take your pastor some venison sausage.”**

But that's not all... if you're more agrarian, you must take your pastor your new wine. (And we don't have to be legalists here... it could be the aged stuff.) You must also bring your minister, the wool from the first shearing. The Really Living Bible translates that, **“Thou art to render unto you pastor the first 10% from any mutual fund interest...”**

Again... I find this very interesting. It's a book about their past... **“What's our story ... how did we get here?”** And it's a book of forms. **“How in the world are we going to function in this new world?”**

Our Old Testament passage was towards the end of the book... and it is a kind of liturgical instruction. In other words... how to worship. And it's very specific, isn't it!!! And I suspect that they meant it to be so.

Can you imagine, some new guy... maybe a young man who just inherited the farm? And he knows, he's heard, that he's supposed to gather up some of the first fruits from his crop and take them to the place of

worship... And it wasn't easy to do, because he was a bit anxious, about having enough for his family, this being his first year... But he does it.

He gets there and has a basket full of squash and tomatoes... And there's a long line, so while he's standing there... he's looking down at his hand where he's scribbled the words he's supposed to say...

And he's working on it... trying to memorize it. **“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt with a few people and lived there and.... and... and...”**

Dad-Gum-It ... I always forget that part.... What is it? “and um”... And he has to look down. Oh yeah, “he became a great nation, powerful and numerous.”

So... he's working on it but doesn't quite have it down when he finally makes it up to the priest on duty. So, he figures, he'll just sort of “ad lib”.... Surely, it doesn't have to be just right... I mean, surely, this guy isn't the Sacrifice Nazi... right?

He sets his squash and tomatoes down... “Hey there... okay, **my father wandered a good bit and eventually landed in Egypt... had a few problems with Pharaoh... So he prayed about it and turned it over to the Lord and God got him the heck out of there and here we are today... with all this milk and honey.”**

The priest waits... *“Is that all... you finished?”*

“Oh... and here's some of what I raised for Yahweh... I almost forgot.”

“You done now?”... the priest asked.

“Yeah”...

And, like a professor handing back the first freshman essay, the priest says, *“Leave and come back when you've learned what to say.”*

That's what I imagine anyway... Maybe in your mind you're thinking... *“Oh, I don't know... maybe the priest was too hard on the young man... I mean, he did get the gist of it... it seemed like it was ‘from the heart’... that ought to be enough.”*

Well... maybe... but maybe not... maybe there's some wisdom operating here about how to live in the land... The stories we must not forget and the motions we need to go through in order to be formed.

So... he went over on a rock and memorized his part and got his sacrifice made... He was relieved. And next year when he came back, he had it down pat... It was very rote. **“But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor.”**

He said it year after year... Sometimes, really irritated that the folks down at the temple were so rigid about the whole thing. He even once signed a petition to have the rule changed to say, **“You must give your own personal testimony of all God has done in your life.”** But the reform movement didn't really get going.

One year... during a draught... he said it through clinched teeth as he put his shriveled squash on the altar. **“I bring these first fruits from the soil you have given me.”**

And there was another year... it was the year he hired some workers whose families had been displaced years ago when the Israelites came into the Promised Land. He'd gotten to know them and their story and the words he had to say at the altar came painfully slow and created more tension within him than any sort of gratitude.

The year his wife died... he choked up in the middle of it and the priest finished it for him. He struggled with it...

But he kept saying it...

It was his path...

And in time... something changed. When he stood before the priest the words came from some place else and somehow seemed to by-pass his conflicted mind... they were finally from his heart and it was his story.

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched

arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us the land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me.”

And he, with great care, would place his squash and tomatoes on the altar and bow down before his God.

At least that’s how it might have been. This man walked a path and the path took him deeper into his faith.

There will always be a path... at least if vital and authentic faith is what we’re after. It was that way for our imaginary Israelite... and it’s that way for us. ... It was that way for Jesus.

Did you notice how he responds to these temptations? Jesus responds from his formation. He responds liturgically instinctually. **“It is written...”**

He doesn’t engaged Satan at the level of the intellect. He doesn’t get into a debate with the Devil. **“Um... Lucifer... you’re dealing with some interesting ideas there. First of all, there is the thinking that developed during the Exile about the Messiah being the Son of God... which I’ve done a good bit of study on... and it’s not automatically assumed that the Son of God, would be divine and therefore be able to manipulate the created order... Which raises another more philosophical, ontological question about the nature of God and God’s willingness to work with what is and stones can’t become something other than what they are.”**

That’s not how Jesus does this... He doesn’t deal with this tough spot in his head...

Nor does he deal with it emotionally. **“I just don’t want to jump off the temple and draw a big crowd... I’m afraid... okay. There, I said it.”**

Nope... He falls back onto his training... back into the path. **“It is written...”** What was in his tradition is flowing now in this moment from his heart. He’d been walking a path, and please-- it’s important you see that... He arrived in Bethlehem, not as a grown-up Messiah, but in swaddling.

When Jesus is toddling around at two, he’s not jabbering out as his first words, **“You shall have no other God’s before me.”** No... he’s saying, **“Goo... goo... gaa... gaa...”**

And when he starts reading Hebrew, he’s reading. **“See Rebecca... see Rebecca run... See Rebecca run fast.”** He’s not reading some mystical commentary on the Song of Solomon.

And at twelve when he’s in the temple in Jerusalem... Luke says that he is there **“Listening and asking them questions.”** And, yes... they were impressed by his insights, but Luke ends the story saying that Jesus went home and was in submission to his parents... and he grew because of it.

There’s always a path... If mature faith matters to us... there is always the need to be in submission to something. Yes... freedom is the end game... perhaps even an extemporaneous life of faith... but don’t think you can get to it without first submitting to a path.

Kathy plays today, the way she plays, because she first played the scales.

Jesus makes beautiful music with his life... But he played the scales first. Someone made him memorize the stories and the scriptures... **“No, Jesus, say it again, you didn’t quite get that right, it’s ‘Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test.’”** **“No, Jesus, try it again, it’s ‘Into Thy hands I commit my Spirit.’”**

Jesus deals with the crisis in the desert and that ultimate one on the cross when he feels so forsaken... and does it because he can draw from a deep well. **“It is written and it is written finally on his heart... on his inner being.”**

Well, there are so million conversations to have around this spiritual principle... aren’t there!!! What are we teaching our kids... what are we learning? Do our children know the story, the narrative of scripture... do we? Can our children sing the hymns?

For years my mom stood beside me with her pointer finger and I’d sing every line. And for a while in my life, I didn’t know how important that was... But now when I sing **“Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling...”** I almost always cry.

And when I sing, **“O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast and our internal home...”** When I sing that, faith rises from a deeper place.

There are so many conversations we must have. But for now... here in Lent, may I simply ask, what path are you on? To what... to whom... are you submitting yourself. Christian maturity can't be gotten from a kit you buy on an infomercial.

What suits you... what you're into... won't do and faith will be thin.

What path are you walking? To what are you submissive?

Are you observing Lent? If not, what do you observe? To what disciplines have you given yourself? How is it the rules of our faith become a living reality for you? How will any of it be written on your heart?

There's so much to talk about isn't there... and you know, you need to be talking because out there and in here (the heart) the Tempter is still real busy. And just like it was for Jesus, everyday you're tempted to be less than you are and to be controlled by your needs for pleasure and survival and esteem and power. Everyday...

And how are you doing out there in the desert, day in and day out...

And how will you be when the big moments come?

Will you be able to draw from the deepest well?

And the spiritual principle is... not unless, you've given yourself to a path.

So, start now... let's all do that. It takes a village for all of us... not just the kids. Let's do what the Church has challenged us to do and prepared during this Lenten season. Give something up... examine our lives... repent... it's our path.

And how about we memorize something? I wonder, how badly we'd all stumble if we all tried to say the Beatitudes? The core of Jesus' teachings... are they up there? (in the head)? They probably can't be in here (in the heart) until they're up there, you know.

And how about we memorize the Apostles' Creed. It's simply our condensed story... that's really what a creed is. Sort of like the story that ancient farmer with his squash and tomatoes had to learn.

A path will have a story and it will have practices... and we'll engage in both today. We'll remember our story and say it together and will come here to remember it as well... and we'll do what we've been taught to do.

Just like that ancient Hebrew, we have lines to say... And motions to make. I pray that today, you will know it all again... our story as your story.

Would you join me now as we say the Apostles' Creed?

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.