

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Remembering Who We Are

Deuteronomy 26.1-11

March 9, 2025

Lent I

Jesus was all alone in the wilderness. Hungry, facing temptations. The dark night of human existence. What sustained him through the dark night? A strong sense of identity... knowing who you are, where you come from, what makes you you, and that when you are alone, you are not alone. When the blessings flow and when the darkness closes in, we still say, "Blessed be the Lord."

To endure in the wilderness of life, we, too, must know and remember who we are and whose power is with us. Whose wind is in our sails. At the beginning of Lent Christians often participate in a ritual of recalling our mortality that we may first remember we are creatures and not gods. We say to one another, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." So the very first act in the season of wilderness is remember who we are, lest we forget. This is a foundational, fundamental, everlasting human need.

Of course we forget. We forget who we are and where we come from and who is with us. All of life is a cauldron of distractions, dead ends, mis-directions. The mystics described the "cloud of unknowing" in which those who grow in holiness encounter union with God. Most of us instead live in the haze of confusion in which we can't see where we're going, don't know where we've come from, and stumble our way through daily life, into and out from big decisions we don't know how to make, and into and through habits that if we didn't choose intentionally, still bear heavy with a weight hard to wriggle away from.

One of the gifts of shared worshipping life is the ritual remembrances that cut through the haze:

Do this in remembrance of me

You were baptized with Christ and rise to walk in new life.

You are dust and to dust you shall return.

And for ancient Israel, a down-to-earth ritual that said so much in so little: "*My father was a wandering Aramean.*"

Before crossing from the desert into the promised land, each person of Israel was to memorize a short confession to be ready on their lips when they made their offering of first fruits in the new land into which they were about to enter. After 400 years of enslavement in Egypt and 40 years of exodus wilderness, these are some of the last instructions they were given: Don't forget what you've come through, who you are and where you came from. When you get there, when you have come into the land flowing with milk and honey, there's something you're to do and to say. You're to do it to remember where you are, who you are,

who and what you come from, to whom you owe your gratitude, with whom you share this life, and what that requires of you.

This land you are about to enter is a good land and you're going to make a life there. The land is a gift. A gift from the Lord your God who has done great things for you and seen you through this wilderness. The land is an *inheritance*—its yours to own and be responsible for. You're not just passing through. This is going to be your home. You've lived for so long as slaves, now you have your own place. This is yours. Live in the land and grow things. The land is flowing with milk and honey, but your responsibility now is to grow things by caring for the soil, plant seeds and nurture them, tend to the animals and their relationship with the land. You're going to come into—in the fullest sense of the word, live in, and know the land so well that it becomes part of you. That's what happens with anyone who puts their shoulder to the plow and their hands in the dirt. So this land is gift, ownership, participation in the creative life-sustaining way of the Lord your God. And then you'll grow good and beautiful things.

You're to take the first fruits of your vines, plants, trees, and stalks, put them in a basket bring them before the priest of the Lord and offer them as a sacrifice of gratitude. In a sacrifice of gratitude, you remember who you are.

Every ritual of remembrance is a celebration of God's life in ours:

“Do this in remembrance of me.” At the eucharist—we give God thanks for our salvation by bringing before the Lord the gifts of the Lord in bread and wine and sharing with one another.

“You were baptized with Christ and rise to talk in new life.” We give thanks for our baptisms, and pray for those who are being baptized as a sign of new life in Christ that we share with them.

“You are dust and to dust you shall return.” God is the author and architect of life. All of life is sustained by God's grace, and all of life when these bodies die, return to the *adamah* from which *adam* was brought to life.

And for ancient Israel onto which we are grafted, a ritual of remembrance: when you enter the land, this gift, this inheritance, this responsibility, remember where you came from. Each individual was to learn to say: “My father was a wandering Aramean.” Remembering Jacob who left famine-plagued Canaan for Egypt generations before, it invokes the whole history of the patriarchs from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to his sons.

“In his wandering, in his starving, my poor father went down into Egypt and there prospered—from a few in number to a great nation. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord. And the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with

a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us to this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Say all of this. Take your basket, set it before the altar, bow down before the Lord, say all of this, and celebrate. You celebrate with everyone whose participation in the feast is made possible by your sacrifice—the Levites who have no land, the foreigners among you, the widows and orphans, and all who need—all will eat to their fill. The somber ritual draws its power from a story of suffering transformed into a community of celebration.

It's the darkness of Good Friday to the dawn of Easter morning. It's the confession, “I was lost but now I'm found.” It's *Family Vacation*, but in this version, Chevy Chase and his kids pull into Wally World, and it's open and the best place that ever existed and they get to stay there.

Here is ritual remembrance of a most unlikely story, a story worth telling and retelling over and over, year after year, telling in eloquent words and through the generous giving and free sharing of an overflowing bounty of delicious food.

But then here's Jesus, all alone, no community to share or celebrate with, in a desolate place, no flowing milk or honey.

Yet for all these vulnerabilities, Satan's temptation of Jesus looks so silly in light of the grand story which was already his strength. “If you're the Son of God, turn these stones to bread.”

“Turn these stones to bread? That's your temptation. I've turned diets of manna and quail into milk and honey. You think a few loaves of bread are all that interesting to me? I've turned chaos into creation, I've turned wilderness wanderers into farmers. I've turned water into wine, enemies into friends; failed marriages into reconciled covenants. Stones into bread? My father was a wandering Aramean. You don't concern me.

“You'll give me all the kingdoms of the world? That's your temptation? I've turned a lost divided little family into a nation. I've turned sinners into saints and warriors into peacemakers. I've turned slaves into freemen, I've turned slaves of addiction into empowered, freed people; I've turned poverty to riches, back to poverty, and then to abundance. I've been the light in the valley of the shadow of death and the rod and staff for the stumbling and weak who don't think they can take another step. I've made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear. I've preached good news to the imprisoned and freedom to captives. I've turn Simon into Peter and Saul into Paul, and Mary Magdelene into the church's first preacher of the gospel of the resurrection. I whisper words of faith to men and women under persecution. That's your temptation?

“Throw myself down from the temple to test whether God can catch me? That’s your temptation? I’ve seen the lion and lamb lay down together; I’ve turned mountains and valleys into highways and led God’s people home. I will turn a crown of thorns into a crown of glory and a tomb of death into an altar in the world. I will roll away stones. I will shake heaven and earth.

“Turn these stones into bread? I could turn them into a 5-course banquet if I wanted or build them into a temple in 3 days if I chose.

“No thanks, I think I’ll let them lie here a little longer. And someday, those who come, long from now, will say of me, ‘My savior was a wandering, starving Judean. He went to the wilderness led by the Spirit. There the spirit of evil, Satan, treated him harshly and afflicted him for 40 days, but he endured in faith.’”

In the trial, he remembered who he was. In the wilderness, he discovered who he was.

And the Lord brought him out from the wilderness, led him into a ministry that changed the world, that flowed with the milk of truth and the honey of grace. And when he faced the cross, he knew what to do and knew what to say because of who he is and who God is—not my will but yours be done.

And he went to the cross. And there all creation wept. But then three days later the stone rolled away, the thunder rolled, the tomb empty, and he was raised from the dead. And we all with him.

We who are dust are given this life and the promise of life to come; we who are buried with him are raised to walk in new life; we who walk with him are made the body of Christ broken open for the world. We who forget who we are, remember: our father was a wandering Aramean; our savior was a crucified Judean.

And so, as we cross into the Lenten season of wilderness just as when we cross into the land of Easter-abundance, we are given grace in all things in ancient words. A divine story of deliverance that make us who we are:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 Creator of heaven and earth,
 and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died and was buried;
 he descended into the dead;
 on the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he will come 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 life everlasting.
Amen.

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