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Lent 1C
Peace, Seattle
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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

TUTORING FOR THE FUTURE

In the 1965 epic film, SHENANDOAH, we meet Charlie Anderson (played by Jimmy Stewart), a widowed farmer who's trying to carve out a life in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley during the time of the Civil War.

In an early scene from the film, Charlie and his clan gather around the dinner table after a hard day's work on the farm and Charlie offers this blessing:

> LORD, he prays, WE CLEARED THIS LAND. WE PLOWED IT, SOWED IT, AND HARVESTED IT. WE COOKED THE HARVEST. IT WOULDN'T BE HERE AND WE WOULDN'T BE EATING IT IF WE HADN'T DONE IT ALL OURSELVES. WE WORKED DOG-BONE HARD FOR EVERY CRUMB AND MORSEL, BUT WE THANK YOU LORD JUST THE SAME FOR THE FOOD WE'RE ABOUT TO EAT. AMEN.

Charlie's prayer, if you can call it that, is the quintessential refrain of the self-made man; a rugged individualist's rant that's long on bravado but short on memory. The very kind of approach to life that our lesson from Deuteronomy today seeks to counter.

Imagine the scene in Deuteronomy's 26th chapter: after 39 years, eleven months, and one week in the wilderness, the Israelites are gathered on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land. After nearly forty years of feeling lost and unsure, after years of missteps, confusion, feuds, and the same dinner menu day after day after day, here they sit on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley.[1]

And it's in this context that they receive instructions about how they are to practice gratitude when they come into the land.

> When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you… 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. [and you will say:]… "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.

This is what we might call programmed gratitude. The whole ritual is designed to support the understanding that Israel didn't engineer its own success (nor do I); didn't arrive where she was except through God's faithfulness to the promise (and that's my story, too).

A key part of this ritual of First Fruits is the recitation of Israel's history in which the LORD is given top billing through the entire saga. And it's in the rehearsal of the familiar story once again, year after year, that God's faithfulness and steadfast love are revealed again and again.

[1] Nick Carter, Feasting on the Word. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. P. 27.

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The theme we are living with as we begin Lent is LEGACY, and this year as we read through our LEGACY 2 devotional day by day, we're thinking particularly about the LEGACY we as a congregation are in the process of constructing for the future.

As the Deuteronomy story attests, without a past there is no future. And so by sharing our stories of LEGACIES received and given with each other, by thinking about God's faithfulness in bringing us this far along the journey, we are opening our eyes once more, just as Israel did at the First Fruits celebration, to the God of abundance who calls us to keep gratitude and abundance front and center in our lives.

But it's easy for us modern urbanites to find ourselves at a distance from the cycle of seedtime and harvest that characterized the human experience for the last 12 millennia. When I go to the grocery store I see the same fruits and vegetables in the produce isle practically every day of the year.

And when I turn on the TV, I enter a world in which self-fulfillment is linked to purchasing the latest technological innovation.

How does that reality shape my appreciation and gratitude for what God has given me?

Writer Archie Smith puts it in the form of a QUESTION:

> What happens to our sense of self and history when their priorities are organized NOT around the rhythms of seedtime and harvest but around our material possessions and shifting market values?
>
> **ANSWER: They start to drift.** We may no longer know why they give thanks or to whom we give it. Our identity and our memory as God's people delivered from bondage may become so detached that certain acts of thanksgiving become meaningless. In such a context as this, this text from Deuteronomy may help counter the illusion that we can deliver or save ourselves through our own technologies.[2]

The season of Lent is a season for gaining clarity: clarity about our bond with Christ in baptism; clarity about our lifelong call as Christians to discover God's will for our lives; clarity about reasons to be grateful for a Lord whose giving knows no ending.

One of the simplest ways we can do this is by offering a prayer of thanksgiving around the dinner table at each meal. Not a prayer in the manner of Charlie Anderson, but a prayer in the manner of the psalmist:

> THE EYES OF ALL WAIT UPON YOU, O LORD, AND YOU GIVE US OUR FOOD IN DUE SEASON…YOU OPEN YOUR HANDS AND SATISFY THE DESIRE OF EVERY LIVING THING.

What if, in this Lenten season, we were to add to another discipline to our stewardship repertoire—**First Fruits giving?**

What if, instead of giving God a portion of the leftovers after our obligations and appetites were satisfied, what if we gave God a tithe of the first and best fruits from our bank accounts? Might that discipline lead us to an ever greater experience of gratitude? And might it lead us to an even wider embrace in solidarity and caring with those who have less that we?

God wants the best we have to offer—but God does not want what we cannot give. None of us can give what we don't have. But we can give generously and continually from what we do have. And in

[2] Ibid, p. 26.

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that giving, we can hold up the memory of God as the First and Greatest Giver. The one who in Jesus Christ meets us at his banqueting table, offering his very self in a legacy of love that feeds and sustains us as we live the gospel as a community of gratitude and hope in the world.

Amen.