

Saving God
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
March 10, 2019

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.

I remember exactly where this book was located on our family bookshelf while I was growing up. It was the bottom shelf, because this book was too big and too thick for the other shelves. As a child, I would often use this book for non-reading purposes. As a hard backing to draw on. As a base for a tower of blocks. As part of a ramp for my Hot Wheels.

I used this book for all of those things, but I was always very careful with it. That's because I knew what this book was about. Its red-speckled spine communicated its content just as well as its title: *The Bloody Theater or Marytrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who Baptized Only*

Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660.

Whew. This book is heavy. Literally and figuratively. Growing up, the Martyrs Mirror provided a reflection of what true discipleship meant, and it continues to do so today. It means bodies. Not just words. But bodies. My body. Your body. The church's body. As Paul writes in Romans chapter 12, we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices. This is what God wants from us. This is our worship, Paul writes.

I still believe this, of course, and yet, if the only reflection we see in the Martyrs Mirror is our own-- our spiritual ancestors, our sacrifice, our self-denial, our bodies – then we might as well use this book as a booster seat or a base for block towers. We'd be missing something.

Today, as you know, is the first Sunday of Lent. The most common question that people ask each other during this season is "What are you giving up for Lent?" Yet, if Lent is about what we're giving up – our giving, our sacrifice, our self-denial, our discipline – then we're missing something.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Genesis, chapter 45, the story of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers. Joseph, sold as a slave by his brothers and carried off to Egypt, rises to power until he is appointed by Pharaoh to be the administrator of Egypt's grain supply. And so, when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for grain during a time of famine, Joseph not only forgives them, he invites them to settle in Egypt so he can provide for them. Stopping here. It's a beautiful story. Joseph, a former slave, forgives his brothers and liberates his family from famine. But the story quickly takes an ominous turn.

The famine continues, and there is a food shortage. With Joseph doing Pharaoh's work, the people of Egypt and Canaan first give their money to Pharaoh in exchange for food. When all their money was gone, they then give their cattle to Pharaoh in exchange for food. The next year, they give their land to Pharaoh in exchange for food. In the third year, they have no collateral but themselves. So they exchange themselves – their bodies – in exchange for food. Genesis, chapter 47, verse 21, pulls no punches when it describes what happened: "The land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other." Joseph, the former slave, administrates the policy that will eventually enslave Israel.

In an economy based on scarcity, there is never enough food, there is never enough money, there is never . . . enough. So we work and we work and we work, and we can never rest. We eat and we eat and we eat, and we are never fed. Because never-ending hunger must be met

with never-ending consumption, the ones with too much eat at the expense of the ones with too little. In an economy based on scarcity, our hunger is never satisfied, our anxiety is never calmed. And so we give ourselves over to the same flawed system founded on the same evil myths bowing to the same false gods that take the same perilous tolls on our bodies and our souls. This is the world's worship, and it's the liturgy of the damned.

And, the thing is, even if we dress it up with religious language, we follow that liturgy if we are convinced that our security, our survival, our salvation, depend entirely on what we give up -- our sacrifice, our self-denial, our bodies. It's the liturgy of the damned because it dooms our bodies to bondage. Just as it did for Israel.

Thankfully, after liberating the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, after leading them through the wilderness for forty years, God gives the people a different liturgy to live – the liturgy of God's abundance. Near the end of the covenant law that God gives the people through Moses, God gives the people instructions for what reads like a worship service. Liturgy included.

When they enter the land of promise, the people are told, they are to take some of the firstfruits of all that they produce and put them in a basket. Most of us are not farmers. But when you think of the things that God has given you, what would you put in your basket?

Through Moses, God tells the people to give their basket to the priest and recite these words:

“A wandering Aramean was [our] 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 The Lord brought us into this place

and gave us this land,
a land flowing with milk and honey.
So now [we] bring the first of the fruit of the ground
that you, O Lord, have given [us].”

After reciting these words, the people are then told to set the basket down and to bow down before the Lord. Then, with all the bounty that God had given them, they are to go and celebrate with the landless – the priests and the aliens. And if you read just a couple verses later, you will see even more specific instructions for how they are to provide for the ones who cannot provide for themselves – the orphans, the widows, the aliens.

They live by God’s mercy, and, and for God’s mercy, they live. They came from dust, from nothing, to dust they shall return, but God makes beautiful things out of the dust.

It the liturgy of God’s abundance,
food is given because people are hungry, not because they are productive.
Food is given generously as a gift, not as leverage for power.
Food is meant to be shared so that those who have much do not have too much and those who have little do not have too little.

I realize that this may not seem like the typical first Sunday of Lent sermon. Lent is a time to examine ourselves, to recognize our sin, to repent, and, here, we have before us a scripture that calls us to Thanksgiving.

Yet, I think it fits. Karl Barth once commented that all of sin is simply ingratitude. Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth, he wrote. “Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning. Grace always demands the answer of gratitude.”

This Martyrs Mirror is not simply a reflection of our best selves. It’s a witness of God’s providence for ordinary people, people who, like a woman finding a lost coin, like a man finding a hidden treasure, and like a merchant finding a precious pearl, joyfully, thankfully gave their lives in response.

Yes, we are to give our bodies as living sacrifices. This is our worship. But it begins with God’s mercy. This Lent, may your giving up be a reflection of what God has graciously given. You live by God’s mercy, and for God’s mercy, you live.