

Tying the Threads Together

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 NRSV

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.

Romans 10:8b-13 NRSV

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Luke 3:21-23, 24 . . . 38, 4:1-13

At the time when all the people were being baptized, this is what happened when Jesus had been baptized and was praying: Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in bodily form as a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my dear son. I am delighted with you.”

At this beginning, Jesus was about thirty years old, the son, it was thought, of Joseph . . . the son of David . . . the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham . . . the son of Adam, the son of God.

Jesus returned from the Jordan, full of the Holy Spirit And he was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tested by the devil for forty days. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘A human being does not live only by bread.’” Then the devil led him up, showed him in one moment all the realms of the civilized world, and said to him, “I will give you all this authority and the glory that goes with it – it’s been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I want – all of it will be yours, if you fall down in worship before me.” Jesus said to him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him alone.’” Then he led him to Jerusalem, put him at the highest point of the Temple, and said to him, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here. Because it is written, ‘He will give orders to his angels about you, to protect you,’ and ‘They will carry you in their arms so that

you will not strike your foot on a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not test the Lord your God.’”

When the devil completed every test, he went away from him until a later time.

Children’s Story

From the time he was little, Sammy knew exactly who he was. He was a Squirrel, a member of the oldest family in the Great Forest. Sammy knew this because every spring his grandfather retold the Squirrel family story.

“We came long ago,” Grandpa Squirrel said, “from far away. And what a difficult journey it was! First, we had to cross a great river, because the airport was on the other side. But it was Mrs. Ippi’s river, and she wouldn’t let us cross until we planted a thousand oak trees on her estate.

“When we finally reached the airport, we had to split up into three groups. Some of us boarded the Wright Flyer, some of us the Spirit of Saint Louis, and some of us a Lockheed Electra. Yes, we were flying Squirrels who made our journey on the Great Planes.

“After we landed in the Great Forest, we settled on the top floor in a tree we bought from the Muh family. It used to be Chris Muh’s tree, but now it was our family tree. We have lived in that tree — working and playing, building nests, storing away acorns — year after year, generation after generation . . . ”

That’s some of the story. Grandpa Squirrel told it every spring. He told it the same way every time. And every member of the Squirrel family knew the story by heart.

You might remember that Sammy and his family had to move not long ago when their family tree cracked and fell to the forest floor. That has added a new chapter to the Squirrel family story.

One day it will be Sammy’s turn to tell the family story, including that new chapter. He will tell the story to his own grandchildren, and they will know exactly who they are.

Sermon

The church year tells a story. At the center of that story, of course, is Jesus. We begin in Advent, reliving the ancient longing for the messiah to come, renewing our own hope for Jesus to come again. During the season of Christmas and Epiphany, we fix our attention on the Incarnation. Jesus is God. God has come to be among us as one of us. Lent finds us on the road with Jesus, the road from the wilderness to the cross. Through Easter and Ascension, we celebrate the victory and lordship of Jesus. Not only did he rise from death, but he rose to the seat of all authority at God’s right hand. Then there’s Pentecost and the rest of the year — we call it “ordinary time.” This is where we live. Jesus sends the Spirit, his life-giving breath, and new life sprouts, buds, begins to blossom and bear fruit in us and around us. This is the life of the coming kingdom, and we can taste it already. That’s the story of the church year.

Today is the first Sunday in the chapter called Lent. That chapter begins with a story of its own.

Our stories define us; they tell us who we are. This Lent I’m reading Armenian Golgotha, by Grigoris Balakian. It’s an eyewitness account of the genocide of 1915-1918 when more than 1.2 million Armenians were eliminated by Ottoman Turkey. I decided to read the book because I want to, I need to know more. It’s the story of my people. My grandparents managed to leave Ottoman Turkey in the setting of an earlier genocide, before the final, systematic genocide of 1915-1918. That story has been a haunting presence for my whole life. I want to, I need to know more, in order to know who I am.

Again and again, the LORD God told his people Israel, “Remember who you are!” That’s a central burden of the book of Deuteronomy. “Remember who you are.” Deuteronomy is set at the end of forty years of wilderness wandering, on the threshold of the Promised Land. A new chapter is about to begin, everything that four hundred forty years had been aiming at. “When that new chapter begins,” the LORD God says, “don’t forget how you got there. Remember who you are.”

And the LORD God gave them a script. “Here’s what to do. Here’s what to say.” What it amounted to was this: “Tell your story again. The story about Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. The story about Egypt, slavery, and exodus. The story about old promises being kept in this new land.” The message was clear: “This is your story; this is who you are!”

What happens, though, when the connection to the story is tenuous? For biblical Israel, the connection was certainly stretched by time. With the passing of each generation, the connection to Abraham became more remote. How many “greats” can you put in front of “grandfather” before it becomes ridiculous?

But there was always the blood connection. No matter how many “greats” were needed, the “grandfather” part still belonged. And there were regular reminders to keep the story and the connection alive. The exodus was recounted every Passover. And each generation placed itself in the story: “We were slaves; the LORD delivered us.”

I have a harder time feeling connected. My mother’s family didn’t tell the story: exactly when and why my grandparents left Ottoman Turkey, who stayed behind, who was never heard from again. Still, the larger story has haunted me for my whole life. Because of blood, I suppose. They were my people, 1.2 million of them.

But what about when the story is ancient and there are no blood connections? What I’m wondering about is the connection, if any, between Israel’s story and Gentiles. For a long time now, we Gentile Christians have claimed Israel’s story as our story. We don’t keep Passover, to take one example, but we do tell the story over and over as a formative story for us. How do we get there? And do we have a right to be there? Are we legitimately connected to that story?

Jesus makes the connection and makes it strong. Jesus’ story is Israel’s story. Jesus, of course, is connected by blood; he is a Jew. But with Jesus, it’s not just a re-telling of Israel’s story, putting yourself into the story. In Jesus, we have the story of Israel all over again. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness; Jesus forty days. Israel complained of hunger and God gave them manna, bread from heaven; hungry Jesus wouldn’t turn a stone into bread. Israel made its own gods out of gold; Jesus refused to worship any god but the LORD. Israel put the LORD to the test again and again; Jesus would not do so. In each case, Jesus faced down the devil and the devil’s tests with Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy on his lips. Deuteronomy. And so Jesus was about to move from the wilderness into the Promised Land, about to move from the wilderness into his kingdom.

And that is another connection: Jesus is Israel’s king. At his baptism, Jesus is identified as the “son of God.” That was a title historically given to Israel’s king, a way of saying that the king is God’s “right hand man.” And it’s just at this point that the devil tests Jesus repeatedly. “If you are the son of God, the king, God’s right hand man, prove it by asserting your power or by proving the relationship.” Or, “If you are a king, then reign over the domain I can give you.” The devil wasn’t able to get under Jesus’ skin, though, with questions about his identity. Jesus remained Israel’s king, on the way to his throne.

And his throne is the throne of human dominion over the earth and its creatures. In his account of Jesus’ being tested in the wilderness, Mark suggests the theme. “Jesus was with the wild animals,” Mark writes. In other words, Jesus is in the setting of human dominion that is pictured in the biblical creation accounts, ruling over the wild animals.

Luke gives us the same theme in a different way. At his baptism, Jesus is identified as the “son of God.” Next Luke gives us Jesus’ genealogy, which goes all the way back to “Adam, the son of God.” Now if Adam is the son of God and Jesus is the son of God, then Jesus’ story is the universal, human story. It’s our story. We are connected by blood, blood we share merely by being human. No matter how many “greats” we have to put in front of “grandfather,” this is the story of our family. In Jesus, all the stories are drawn together, each thread connected to the others: God’s story, Israel’s story, Jesus’ story, the human story, our story, your story, my story.

That’s why the Apostle says, “The same Lord is lord of all.” And that’s why he says that we are united with Christ through faith, buried with him by baptism into death, and raised with him to new life. His story is Israel’s story is our story. It tells us who we are. We walk with him in that story this Lent, walk with him to his Golgotha, walk with him to his cross, perhaps on the way finding our own.