“Working Hard or Hardly Working?”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 12:1-8

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Children's Sunday

You know, having Easter be so late in the calendar year has been difficult. It seems like it’s taken forever to get to Ash Wednesday. And now that we’ve arrived, as has the wonderful thing that is Daylight Savings Time, our Lenten Taize services will most likely take place not in the dark as in years past, but in the dim light of the evening. Maybe this will also mean that Easter will be a warm spring day and not a cold snowy one in which little girls in their new Easter dresses will shiver from cold.

Another way it has been difficult has been in deciding the date for Children’s Sunday. Between all of the activities that our church puts on and scheduling around things like spring break and Mother’s Day and the end of the Sunday school year, this was the only date we could find that worked for most.

And so as we went about planning Children’s Sunday, we discussed things that would need to be considered because March 10th would be the first Sunday in Lent. There would be no “Alleluias!” in the Declaration of Pardon. The hymn selections might take on a more serious note than non-Lenten ones, and would it be possible for the parade of preschoolers to be a little more somber? Is there a way we can have the three and four year olds truly reflect on their total depravity whilst they wave their colorful scarves and lead the rest of the children in?

Probably not. After all, we *should* celebrate our children and welcome them to worship with us and encourage them to lead us in worship.

And yet here we find ourselves. The first Sunday in Lent. Ready to begin the journey alongside Jesus and his disciples to the Cross and then to the tomb and then finally, to Easter morning.

But today's lectionary text feels a little out of place. Instead of pushing forward with Jesus’s journey, we are talking about the Israelites’ arrival in the Promised Land.

What gives?

In today’s Old Testament text, the Israelites have been rescued by God, and have wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and are now on the threshold of the Promised Land. Finally!

One commentary writer does an excellent job of setting the stage for us so we can more fully understand the context surrounding Moses’s instructions.

He writes,

“This is the climax of the Exodus story. Imagine this: thirty-nine 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, having had to learn a mountain of laws and rules, after being chastised for bad behavior (often well-deservedly!), and after having spent a good deal of their sojourn being confused, underfed, and poorly housed — wondering why in the world they left Egypt in the first place — here they sit on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley, the promised land lying in the distance! Everything they have endured, worked, and sacrificed for is at long last within their reach.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

They are poised, ready to enter this land they’d been praying for, dreaming of, and yearning to see. Here it is.

And then Moses stops to give instructions one more time. And this time, it’s about worship.

I can imagine some of the Israelites muttering, “Yeah, yeah, Moses. We’ll definitely do that. We promise. But first…can’t we just have a quick look around?? Pick our plots of land? Check out the neighborhood schools? Then we PROMISE we’ll do all that first fruits stuff.”

But Moses says to them, “Hey. This is important.”

Moses begins to outline exactly what the Israelites are to do when it is time to worship God. To us, these might seem like a long worship to-do list — much like our own Sunday bulletins.

Okay, Moses. Take the fruit. The first ones. Put them in a basket. Go to God’s dwelling place and find the priest. Say a few words. Give the priest the fruit basket. Say a few words. Have a party. Got it, Moses.

There’s a great scene in the holiday classic, “A Christmas Story,” where Ralphie brings his teacher a giant fruit basket. While his classmates are each give her an apple, placing them one by one on her desk, Ralphie has brought a basket filled with exotic fruits. It is so tall that his teacher can’t even see him behind the pile of fruit. You see, Ralphie hopes that he can buy Miss Shields’ approval and so guarantee an A on his famous Red Rider BB Gun theme. Unfortunately for Ralphie it doesn’t work, and he receives a C+ and a caution about shooting his eye out instead.

Moses’s directive to the Israelites to return to God their first fruits isn’t in the hopes that they can buy God’s approval and thus secure even more blessings from God.

Moses’s directive is a mandated response from the Israelites for the blessings God has already given them.

God has already been at work in the lives of the Israelites. These first fruits are a response of gratitude, not a bribe.

When Moses tells them to offer the first fruit of the ground, there’s a lot of implicit promises in that imperative.

Firstly, the fruit of the ground implies that the Israelites are going to be in the Promised Land for a while. They are going to settle down, build houses, cultivate the land. They will get a system of crops set up. They will have organized religion with rites and sacrifices and a place for God to dwell. They will no longer be a transient people; they will have a home.

Secondly, by giving the first of the crops to God, they give with the promise that there will be more food to come. If you are an Israelite who has been subsisting on manna and quail, it will be tempting to squirrel away the first fruits, to make sure your storage buildings are full, and *then* make your offering to God.

But that’s not part of the instructions. While God’s promises of security are implicit here, Moses is explicit in his directions. You shall take some of the first fruit…and make an offering to God. Why? Moses reminds them, “the first fruits…which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Why should they take this risk and give away the food they’ve waited so long for and worked so hard for? Because they grew it on land that God gave them.

Moses emphasizes that God is giving them the land six times in this passage. In case there is any temptation to credit themselves for all they will accomplish in the Promised Land, Moses makes sure that they *remember* that it is God who gave them the land in the first place. Moses calls it an inheritance — something that the Israelites haven’t done anything to earn other than trusting in God’s goodness all this time. God is giving them this land out of God’s love alone.

The emphasis on God’s gift of land and protection is important for the Israelites’ memory. And today’s text is all about memory.

Moses directs the Israelites to incorporate memory into their worship. Verses 5-10 are an example of one of the first creeds used in worship by the Israelites. Creeds — like the Apostles’ Creed we recite together often or the affirmation of faith that we will say together in a few minutes, are statements of shared beliefs of a community. Creeds often pair theological statements about God with memories of God’s historical involvement with humanity. For example, the Brief Statement of Faith details just what the Kingdom of God looks like by walking us through Jesus’s ministry.

The creed in today’s Deuteronomy text also uses history to help the Israelites make theological claims about God. For five verses, the creed recounts God’s love for God’s people through the ages.

It begins by telling Jacob’s story, “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…” It continues through the Egyptian enslavement and then tells of God’s deliverance from the hands of Pharaoh describing God’s “mighty hand…outstretched arm…and terrifying display of power with signs and wonders.” The creed concludes by affirming that God has followed through with God’s promises by bringing them into the promised land.

When the Israelites make this offering to God, they are remembering, both through word and action God’s saving work in their lives.

Moses’s instructions aren't just about agriculture and a one-time sacrifice. They are instructions for worship. It’s Moses’s Promised Land Worship 101 class.

This entire passage describes a fancy word that we practice each week. Liturgy.

The actual word, “liturgy” comes from two Greek words - one meaning “work” and the other meaning “people.” Liturgy literally means then, “the work of the people.”

Liturgy is work. We practice liturgy when we craft our prayers, but also when we say them together. Blogger Maggi Dawn says that liturgy, “might legitimately be said to be work that is first for God, that also transforms our world and benefits people.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

I am grateful to our children for putting in the hard *work* of writing and leading today’s liturgy. I’ve watched them study today’s text, do their own word-smithing, pour over possible hymn choices, come in on Friday to practice their music, and even last week practice walking around the church waving colorful scarves.

Our kids have worked *hard* to put today’s worship service together. And their work glorifies God and does indeed transform our world. Want to know how our children picture glorifying God? Watch three and four year olds lead a processional. Want to know what our children are concerned about? Sit in with them as they write out confessions. And when today’s service is over, I invite you to come up here and read some of the prayers that they’ve been constructing over the past few months at Fired Up Fridays and have woven into chicken wire.

Our kids are have been hard at work.

They’ve learned that worship isn’t a passive experience. And we are invited to join them in the hard work during our worship services today.

In worship we are hard at work remembering, like the Israelites did, God’s work in our lives and in the lives of all of God’s people. We affirm the love of God in Jesus each week. We wrestle with difficult texts and we discern who God is calling us to be, holding up the stories of the Old and New Testaments of reminders of God’s redemptive work for God’s people.

Scripture helps us remember. Renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright describes Scripture as a “five-act play, full of drama and surprise, wherein the people of God are invited into the story to improvise the unfinished final act.” He adds that our ability to faithfully execute our roles in the drama depends on our willingness to enter the narrative … to see how our own stories intersect with the grander epic of God’s redemption in the world.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Why do we kick off our Lenten journey with this text from Deuteronomy?

This text invites us into the Lenten practice of gratitude. What are the ways in which God blesses us and how can we respond to those in gratitude?

The text invites us to remember our ancestors. The Israelites’ creed begins by remembering their ancestor who they describe as a “wandering Aramean.” Who are the people in our lives who have been foundational to helping us understand how much God loves us?

And finally, this text encourages us to remember our past. When we take a step back and look at our lives and of the life of this church, where do we see God hard at work loving us?

This Lent, I invite you to get to work. Find a Lenten practice that helps you do one of these things — express gratitude, remember those who have gone before us, or to remember God’s movement in your life — and work hard to keep that practice. Come to worship weekly. Instead of asking yourself, “What did I get out of worship today?” Ask yourself, “what did I put *in* to worship today?”

Liturgy is the work of the people. We are God’s people. Let’s get to work.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Nick Carter; Feasting on the Word; Page 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://maggidawn.net/2014/09/21/liturgy-its-not-the-work-of-the-people/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. N.T. Wright, “How can the Bible Be Authoritative?” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)