

Faith in Christ - Our First Fruits

#14 15-16

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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.

What we have just read and heard from Deuteronomy is the telling of an ancient liturgical act . . . which includes a confession of faith. It is considered the climax of the exodus story. After all the decades of wandering they have settled in the promised land and are ritualistically marking a ceremony to remind themselves, and to teach others, the story of their experience of trusting in God. The reference to the wandering Aramean, referring to Jacob, helps people to not forget their history, the stories and the faithfulness of God. And this ritual is designed to help the people not to forget where they came from, what they have learned, experienced, overcome in life, and with whose help they got to the land of milk and honey.

And it is important to do so. It is important to remind ourselves every once in a while where we have been, and not undervalued the journey. Because where we are today is different than where we were yesterday. Every day is a new opportunity to be one with God - to experience the joy and the love of God in this moment. Our challenge is in not bringing the fear and the confusion of yesterday into our today.

This is why the ritual of giving our first fruits was founded and so vital to the faith experience of our forbearers. Giving to God our first thoughts, our first bits of life and vitality, is making an investment in the mystery of God. It is valuing the sacred faith based experience over our sometimes confusing and insecure perspectives of our lives.

It is also important to remind ourselves, and keep the habit of giving God our first fruits, because we can so easily get lulled into feeling like we deserve everything we have now, and in fact, often our hearts are focused on wanting more! We just came out of the Christmas season where the patterns in society has been to focus was on what we want materially. Now we are facing a season of

contemplating what we want spiritually, and traditionally the ritual of Lent is a tool to help us focus on the spiritual.

One of the most difficult parts of being human is to know what we don't know. We are often feeling the need to have an answer to every question, because our brains do hate voids. Well Lent, is designed to be a time of wanting to rid ourselves of our own ego, and try to discover what God would have us know. And part of getting there is in discovering what parts of our personality are prohibiting us from experiencing the mystical presence of God. We need to find ways to break our everyday pattern of being human and seek new ways to acknowledge our human voids, and to be quiet and await the sacred to fill us with God's presence.

Even Christ had to do something special to get him in the place where he knew what he knew. How would he have truly known that he was strong enough, one with God enough, to resist temptation, if he had not had the experience in the wilderness that we read of in the Gospel?

Christ was always placing himself outside of the comfortable, always exemplifying living in faith, always making his life a testimony ~ making his entire life a constant ritual of giving the first fruits.

It is interesting to contemplate how the concept of first fruits has been interpreted in different ways. I saw the other day a photo of a church somewhere, which had a bulletin board and on the top of it was: "Will a man rob God? Malachi 3:8" and under it there was: "Non-Tithers Board" followed by a list of people who were not tithing. As though God was in need of the money, and what God desired was not the people placing the desire of oneness with God as their first fruits, but the proof of a good Christian is in how much they tithed.

What we are being asked to do, in the church tradition of Lent - is to place ourselves in situations which are out of the ordinary, in order to help us focus on how we have strayed - what we don't know - how we have let our lives become routine and not aspired to an extraordinary faith. We are being asked to make our first life fruits such as these: prioritizing being as Christ would have us; examining and being prepared to sacrifice our belief systems which are contrary to Christ's teachings; setting our faith as our priority! Our first thoughts, our first fruits are our souls living ever minute trusting in Christ to help us become as he would have us. Trusting in Christ as we transform ourselves during these next 6 weeks we are helping to transform the world into a kinder more just place.

Rev. Frank Powell, a college/young adult minister wrote an article called, "9 Sins the Church Is Okay With" I will not quote it all, I have copies of it for you to read if you desire. I think these perspectives are perfect to contemplate during Lent. He starts his article by referring to the simple little O ring which cause the tragedy of the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion and wondered, "What if the big sins, you know the ones you try hardest to avoid, aren't the greatest threat to your joy and the church's mission? Maybe it's the sins lying underneath, the ones considered normal or acceptable, the ones going undetected, that are affecting the church the most." His point is what Lent is all about. Contemplating with trust in the Christ we claim as savior, what is going on in our souls, truly. And it can be frightening, and difficult and painful. That is why the community ritual of the first fruits is so important - because in community we learn we are not alone. That we can be who we are in a safe loving environment, and dare to be who God is calling us to be by Easter! So most blessed Lenten experience everyone!