



## ***On the Road Again***

A Sermon for Northminster Church

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### *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, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with an awe-inspiring display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and the Divine brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O God, have given me." You shall set it down before God and bow down in reverence. <sup>11</sup>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.

Jesus couldn't seem to shake that last drop of water out of his ear. And so, he carried with him an echo of the baptismal waters as he followed the Spirit's leading into the wilderness, the baptismal proclamation of "beloved" reverberating in his soul. That proclamation would be his only sustenance through forty days of fasting, solitude, and prayer. It is a journey many of us have made and will inevitably make again, one moment basking in the joy and comfort of our baptism, certain of where we belong, confident of our beloved-ness; only to find ourselves, the next moment, drawn by some force outside ourselves onto a road that seems to lead straight into the middle of nowhere. Just as our ancestors did, we become wanderers, doubters, wrestlers with our own devils in the desert.

For Jesus, temptation takes many forms. First, it looks like the lure of taking a shortcut around suffering: “If you are the son of God,” the tempter’s voice says to a hungry man in the desert, “command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” But Jesus answers, “We do not live by bread alone,” accepting the discomfort that comes with relinquishing his own power, confident that it has something to teach him. In the second attempt, the tempter offers Jesus the glory and authority of high political gains – an even more blatant offer to put his power on display, and again, Jesus refuses. The third time he is offered the chance to cut straight to the heart of the matter – to leap right off the pinnacle of the Temple into the invisible arms of God and there, in the sight of all the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes and priests, in the sight of all who would ever doubt him, to show his hand. But once again, the eyes of Christ see straight through the illusion of this kind of gratification. He recognizes this offer as yet another shortcut around the hard work that awaits him on the journey, and so he declines.

In the lectionary cycle that guides us through the scriptures in a three-year rotation, we come each year to this story – Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness – here on the first Sunday of Lent. Year after year, this is where our journey with Jesus toward the cross begins. We know that this story holds power to shape us because our lives are made up of one journey after another, one temptation after another, one wilderness experience after another. So year after year, we tell the story of Jesus in the wilderness, and if you are like me, it affects you differently each time you encounter it. Think for a minute about what life was like a year ago; I would imagine some things have changed. Stories have a way of granting us perspective when we encounter them in this rhythmic way – the truth that shines through them is channeled through the prism of our experience; the light comes through differently with each turn. There’s something about the ritual itself of choosing to remember this story that grounds us; it gives us a touchpoint, a way to remember who we have been, so that we can keep sight of who we are becoming.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor,” the ancient liturgy went. I imagine the story of the wandering Aramean fulfilled much the same function for the early Israelites. After wandering,

themselves, for more than a generation, finally they found themselves in the land of the promise; they were grounded in a particular place where they could put down roots and start using the word “home,” and that was an entirely new way of being for them as a community. And so, Moses gave them a story, a ritual to repeat over and over to never lose sight of who they were, where they came from, and where they were going.

“My ancestor was a wandering Aramean.” This was how they were to begin each year when they brought the first fruits of their harvest to the altar. Of course, the story goes on to include how that wandering Aramean – referring to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel – went down to Egypt and lived there with his immigrant family, how they began to be oppressed when the Egyptians became afraid of how their numbers were growing, how they cried out to God and God heard and answered in a mighty way, and brought them to the land they now could call their own, the land that had produced the crops they now offered, in part, back to God.

“My father was a wandering Aramean.” That word, “father” or “ancestor,” was interchangeable, because as deeply ingrained as this story was into the fiber of their being, they might as well have been just one generation removed. Telling the stories of our parents and grandparents helps us to understand the stories we are now living – whether they bear any immediate resemblance to our own stories or not.

“My ancestor was a wandering Aramean.” It strikes me that “wandering” is the adjective chosen to describe Jacob. Translators have debated about the meaning of this phrase; the word itself can mean “wandering,” or it can mean “ready to die.” In either case, it seems appropriate that this text from Deuteronomy was chosen in our lectionary cycle to rest up against the story of Jesus wandering in the wilderness, that it was placed here on the first Sunday in Lent, when we watch as Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, ready for the death that awaits him there.

Anyone who goes into the wilderness with their eyes open must be, at some level, ready to encounter a death of some kind. While I was in seminary I became acquainted with a wonderful children's Sunday School curriculum called Godly Play. It's a Montessori-based program, which means it's not like your typical children's Sunday School room; the classroom is full of low shelves stocked with trays, and on each tray rest the pieces – typically nice, handcrafted wooden pieces – that are needed to tell the Bible story for each session. It also means the atmosphere itself is very different. The first time Zach and I ever encountered a class using this curriculum was the Sunday before Zach began at our previous church as the youth minister; the children's minister at the time wanted him to get a sense of how the children were being formed so that he'd know what he had to work with when they reached the youth group. So, with the children's approval, we attended the class together, and when we reached the door, rather than just going in, we waited in a line as each child ahead of us was greeted individually, asked to remove their shoes, and reminded that they were entering a holy space where people encountered God. This meant that in the Godly Play room, children and adults would walk slowly, would talk quietly, and would not interrupt, because – as they were reminded each week – someone in the room might be talking with God. I'm aware it sounds crazy, but it worked. That was the quietest children's Sunday School class I have ever been a part of. And all of it created an atmosphere for the telling of the day's story that was just captivating. I ended up getting hooked, I taught in the class for years.

So on that first day that we attended, after we were greeted at the door, took off our shoes, and joined the circle on the floor, we waited as the storyteller for the day went and retrieved a beautiful, large wooden box on wheels and rolled it to the center of the circle. It was about four inches thick. To the uninformed eye, it might have looked like a fancy sandbox. In the Godly Play classroom, this was a piece of the desert. In a room full of silent children with their eyes locked on her, the storyteller began her tale by waving her hands around in the sand, describing to the children the characteristics of the desert, where so many important stories of the people of God took place. "The desert is a dangerous place," she began. "There is no food or water there; people can die in the desert. When the wind blows," here she whipped up the sand,

creating sand dunes and then immediately erasing them from existence, “the shape of the desert changes; you can lose your way. The sun is scorching hot during the day, and at night it is so, so cold. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to.” It’s intense, right? The kids ate it up.

I learned, after I became a regular teacher in that class, that this was not a one-time monologue; these same words are spoken like a mantra any time the Bible story for the day takes place in the desert, or in the wilderness. And you might be surprised how often that is the case. So many of the core stories of the people of God begin when someone journeys into the wilderness. Abram and Sarai set out from their ancestral home with no idea where the journey would lead; Jacob traveled across the wilderness and back in his lifetime, and spent some time along the way wrestling with his future and his past; Moses spent time in the wilderness both before and after leading the people through the Red Sea into freedom; the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were marched through the desert on their way into exile; many of the prophets encountered God and spoke to the experience from their position in the wilderness, on the margins of civilization.

So when we recognize that Jesus has been led by the Spirit into the wilderness, we can be sure the location is not coincidental. Likewise, when the Israelites take part in the ritual offering of the first fruits of the harvest and begin their story with a reference to their ancestors as wanderers, we can be sure that there is a meaning beyond the purely geographical.

Wandering in the wilderness is a part of our story. It’s a part of our story we would often rather deny, or gloss over, because wandering implies a lack of control many of us are not comfortable accepting. Sometimes our time in the wilderness is an experience we have chosen, and in other cases the wilderness is thrust upon us. But as the people of God learned in each of those desert stories, God is with us, even when we have gone off the edge of the map.

As a community of faith, as the people of God, It is essential that we remember these stories, it is essential that we claim wandering as a part of our DNA, because our lens on the past will affect the way we engage with the present. But even when we have accepted that our wilderness experiences are a part of life, even a good and valuable part of life, it does not mean that we can bear them on our own. And this is why it is so important not just that we remember, but that we remember *together* that we are a wandering people.

We gather to remember the story of our wandering forebears together because we can't survive the desert on our own. We need one another to hold the faith for us when our own faith is too weak to stand.

Sometimes we wander as a community; with any institution this is inevitable. This community of Northminster set out on a journey thirty years ago not knowing where the path would lead, not knowing what came next, not even sure you wanted to be another church. But you were holding one another, and remembering the things that were important to you, the stories that had shaped you – and those stories were the stories of church, of a people who would bear one another up as you walked this road together.

There is a hymn that has become my guiding image for the role of the church, and I would have had us sing it this morning but I requested it for the installation service this afternoon so I won't make you sing it twice in one day. But I do want to give you the lyrics, because they speak so simply and clearly of what I believe to be the central truth of our spiritual journey, wandering and winding as it may be – and of our journeying in community. It's called "The Servant Song," and it goes like this:

"We are travelers on a journey, fellow pilgrims on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load. I will hold the Christlight for you in the nighttime of your fear; I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear. Sister, let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too. Brother,

let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too. I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh I'll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow 'til we've seen this journey through. When we sing to God in heaven, we shall find such harmony borne of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony."

So, Northminster, here we are again. On the road toward Jerusalem, again. Here we are once more on this forty-day journey toward the cross, where each day is darker than the last. There are no surprises here, we know that this is a road that leads to Good Friday, when the light is extinguished, when it seems that the light has gone out of everything. As we journey on this road, in our remembering of our shared ancestry of wandering, often wayward souls, may we bear the Christlight for one another, illuminating the path for one another one step at a time. I hope that you will let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you. I pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

Amen.