

Kirk of St. James, March 9, 2025
Sermon by Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

It would be nice to go back to a time when we were living in what felt (at least a little) likeprecedented times. I am getting really tired of the word unprecedented! Life has felt like it has been built on shifting sand the last while, as things that in the past seemed unshakeable have been shaken. We find ourselves in uncertain days, and that can be exhausting. In pondering the uncertainty the last while, I have come to view the passage we read in Deuteronomy today in a new light. Often this is a passage we share around Thanksgiving, because it is all about the Feast of First Fruits, and how the Israelites were not only to live in this new land, but also remember their story.

It seems a little strange to take a passage typically shared around Thanksgiving, and a time of harvest and ploput it at the beginning of Lent. However, Lent is not just about temptation, and the wilderness, it is also about preparing ourselves for the inbreaking of God's radical grace and abundance. It is a story about identity, and Gods' love in our lives.

When the Israelites first hear the words in Deuteronomy today it is an unprecedented time in their history. "After nearly forty years of feeling lost and unsure, having had to learn a mountain of laws and rules, after being chastised for bad behaviour (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."

I can't imagine how that felt for them. To have been living in tents, constantly on the move, at the mercy of weather, and the availability of food and water. Unable to put down roots, either their own, or in gardens. Uncertain when they might arrive, not knowing where God is leading them, I can't last forty minutes in car let alone forty years. All of that struggle, and all of that pain, now has an end in sight. At this moment God ties memory, thankfulness, and generosity together, and that is their identity as a people.

When they arrive they are to remember the journey. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” Their past is part of what forms their identity. History is important, as one scholar wrote, “The past represents the events that shaped us directly and indirectly, in recognized and unrecognized ways...When we ignore the past or fail to learn the lessons of history, then we are likely to repeat past tragedies on a different scale. **When we do not learn from the past, the future becomes the past revisited.**” I was thinking of examples that might be familiar to us and one of them that sprang to mind immediately was the sinking of the Titanic, and the lack of lifeboats. Now it is required to have enough life saving equipment on board. If that had not changed we would have kept seeing massive tragedies at sea. By the Israelites remembering their journey, the good, the bad, the failures, the lessons, the struggle, they are better able to ground themselves in the present.

The last forty years have brought them to this moment. The promise of milk and honey is about more than sweetness and something to drink. Honey requires bees, and flowers, and fruit—things that are planted and take root. Milk means they have animals, and land for grazing, and a place to keep them. They have known what it is to be lost and hungry and now they will know what its like be to home and full. One of the responses to God’s generosity is thankfulness. The Feast of First Fruits was a way to remember both the journey, and a fulfilled promise. It happened as the barley crops ripened and then over the next two months as more crops grew and were harvested. “The first ripe fruit on any tree was picked and offered (with a ribbon tied around the branch) at the temple.” The community that once wandered is now home and they are forever thankful for God’s fulfilled promise. However, they have a responsibility, they are to remain thankful, and generous.

The Israelites need to remember their past, they give thanks for their present, and then they are to share generously with those around them. God’s gifts are meant to be shared with all—their people, the Levites, and the resident aliens who live among them. The response to God’s love, is thankfulness and generosity.

As we come to the beginning of Lent, this format from the Feast of First Fruits is a helpful blueprint to follow. Firstly, Lent asks us to examine our lives—to remember. Where are there areas that are broken, or need work? Where do our lives need forgiveness or grace? What

is the journey that has carried us to this point in our faith lives? In pondering these things it helps us with repentance, in turning from the things we should not do. It also prepares us for the joy of Easter and the inbreaking of God's love. When we experience God's love, we can't help but want to share it with everyone around us.

As we begin our Lenten journey, we can find hope in this moment. We find life where we did not expect it. Lent is not an easy season, it traverses the difficult and lonely days to the cross, sits in the silence of Good Friday and looks with hope toward Easter dawn. One of the things we do during our Lenten journey or, at least try to do is spend time working on our relationship with God. Some people do this by taking something out of their daily lives as a way of "fasting" to remind them of Christ's own sacrifices. Others add in practices like prayer, quiet time or Bible reading to help strengthen their relationship with God. Some find a mix of ways to spend time reflecting on their faith, like walks, art, nature, etc. Whatever you encounter on this Lenten journey remember that life even when it is filled with chaos and does not go as you hoped that God loves us where we are—it is a firm Promise on his behalf. And if circumstances in life, left you feeling more fragile than usual remember the words of Jan Richardson—"Remember what the Holy One can do with a little bit of dust." God loves you, believes in you, and holds you always.

Friends, as you begin the journey of Lent may you find healing for every crack in your heart, may your weary soul be renewed, and may peace flood every corner of your life where you long for it most.