

First Fruit: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
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This church has no parking! I repeated this over and over in my first interview. After having it ingrained into me in every church growth seminar I've ever attended that parking is essential to growing a church, part of me was struggling to understand how a church which is squeezed between homes and businesses was so alive with the spirit. I imagined how it must have been at first, the first church in the community before many of the homes. The church was a place that all knew and all could easily see. Then, little by little, homes built, every bit of land used around it, bright businesses drawing the attention of PCH drivers so that the steeple is unseen by most who drive by.

How easy for this little church to be lost, I thought. Members could easily be swallowed up into the large churches with preachers everyone wants to talk about and music they grew up with. The neighborhood has reason to lobby for parking restrictions. The land could be sold and developed into a few homes. Or perhaps the church could be turned into a community center serving 12 step groups and acting as a wedding chapel.

This church, its mere survival as a church, is an amazing gift. This church is not just a place where ritual happens and groups meet, but it is a holy place. It is a place where, together, we encounter God. More than that...it is a place where we are formed into God's community. All of our hymns, our prayers, our recall, our scripture, our preaching serve to form us into a people of God. Just as this church building itself visually rebels against that which wants to swallow it up, so we as people of God, because of our worship, rebel against all that seeks to mar the form which God's hand, through worship, carves into our spirit.

Our scripture from Deuteronomy describes such an act of rebellion.

I admit, it doesn't appear so at first. It seems a simple description of people coming to the temple to give the first fruit of their harvest that they might give God thanks for the land which feeds them. It is a quaint ceremony, kind of like our thanksgiving dinners, when we give thanks for having been given so much.

However, listen closely, and you will hear something more than just simple thanksgiving. The proclamation made by each person who brings the first fruit into the place God has chosen for his name to dwell is not table grace. It is rather the declaration of a promise kept: *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.*

This is no easy proclamation in the world which surrounded those who wrote Deuteronomy. It is believed that the laws, ceremonies and creeds found in Deuteronomy were written down in a time when the Assyrians were encroaching bit by bit upon their God given land. They who understood the threat, knew that it is very possible that they would soon lose all their land. Assyria isn't the only threat. So while the original ceremony might have taken its initial form as a celebration of what they had been given, by the time the scrolls were written, the ritual had taken on new meaning. Rather than letting go of their thanksgiving, rather than creating a new ritual to lament what is soon to happen, or trying to call on God's spirit to push back the Assyrians as a ceremonial dance might seek to call forth rain, they hold tight to their trust in God and codify the ritual of thanksgiving, proclaiming God keeps God's promises.

Despite what may come, despite what seems sure to come, we will find the place where God has chosen for his name to dwell. There we will proclaim again and again that God has kept God's promise.

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.

Into the spirit of the worshipper, the proclaimed words carve a deep and abiding trust in God. God carves into the hearts of the worshippers a faith that will sustain each child of Israel when their land is finally lost and they are sent far away from their homes.

There is more. A creed follows. It is a mutually remembered history that tells of what God has done. Interestingly enough, for those who face the threat of soon being homeless, it begins with

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

Remember these words are part of the worship. Each person, after handing the priest the first fruits, recites these words:

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 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.

Despite being only a few in an alien land, God made a nation. When enslaved, the people cried out to God and God answered. When there seemed no way out, God's power created a new way. God gave to Israel the best...not just land...but land flowing with milk and honey.

And, not just to Israel, the nation, but to each one who speaks these words. *So now I bring the first fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.*

The past connects to the present. The past tells what can happen in the future. Through the spoken words of worship the spirit of God carves into the soul a deep and abiding trust and faith, that God creates nations out of a few, answers their cry, acts to save, and gives the best to those who follow him.

It is worship that forms us.

In the Ukraine, an hour bus ride from Kiev takes you past an old, now empty set of government buildings designed to showcase productivity and marked by the communist hammer and sickle, to a place called the "Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life." Unlike the usual, the museum of architecture

is a vast field of fertile land marked by an abundance of grass and trees. On it, the buildings of villages are set up, including onion domed churches.

When communism came, churches had to go. It was not okay to have a people being formed by worship, by liturgies that gave them hope, trust, faith in God's way. Many churches were destroyed or given a different use. A few of the churches were preserved for the sake of history, placed in a fertile field.

The fertility of the field is the great irony of the Ukraine. The Ukraine, when the communist government came to power, became the bread basket for the Soviet Union. The farmers, the peasants, were forced to give more and more of what they produced to the government for them to sell to other nations to help the national treasury. The day came when they had nothing. The years 1932 and 1933 are known as the years of the Great Famine.

Testimony from the Italian consul in one of the regions worst affected areas, states:

A week ago, a special service was set up to try to protect children who have been abandoned. Along with the peasants who flock to the towns because there is no hope of survival in the countryside, there are also children who are simply brought here and abandoned by their parents, who then return to their village to die. Their hope is that someone in the town will be able to look after their children... So for a week now, the town has been patrolled by dvorniki, attendants in white uniforms, who collect the children and take them to the nearest police station... Around midnight they are all transported in trucks to the freight station at Severodonetsk. That's where all the children who are found in stations and on trains, the peasant families, the old people, and all the peasants who have been picked up during the day are gathered together... A medical team does a sort of selection process... Anyone who is not yet swollen up and still has a chance of survival is directed to the Kholodnaya Gora buildings, where a constant population of about 8,000 lies dying on straw beds in the big hangars. Most of them are children. People who are already starting to swell up are moved out in goods trains and abandoned about forty miles out of town so that they can die out of sight.

Those huge empty buildings of steel and concrete on the way to the museum, they were beneficiaries of the harvest, not those who lay dying of hunger.

In 1997, 64 years after the famine, Dave and I entered into the fertile field of churches which together with some windmills and homes were called the Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life. I wish I had more images to help me remember all that was there. Unfortunately, that was the day the battery in the camera ran out.

But not before we captured one of these exhibits, one of these churches, on film. The church is the oldest (dating back to 1742) of those placed aside in the field. Its weathered wooden boards form the walls. The roof is a pyramidal structure. On top of the pyramid, 3 classic domes, the signature of Orthodox Christianity. On each dome is a cross.

It was the first church we saw that day. As David and I walked towards it, we realized there were many people around and inside the church and none of them toted cameras. We saw, instead, they carried in their arms baskets filled with the things of a harvest, fruit and vegetables. We wandered away and watched from a distance as people went in and out of the church. Then it occurred to us. They had come from many places to this weather beaten museum exhibit to give thanks to God by bringing the first fruit of their land. To them, after all those years, after many of their parents had died in the most cruel of ways, it was still their church and they still believed in their God. They had come to proclaim that God keeps God's promises. They had come to worship.

I hear it again and again...I don't come to church but I still believe in God. I'm almost ready to answer, no you don't, not really.

Those who believe, believe enough in the strength of God's power to proclaim it. Those who believe let that proclamation of how God has acted, in human lives, mark their souls. Those who believe wait for the church to be open and run into it to announce to their God, I know you live, I know you keep your promise, I am yours. Those who believe, worship.

Do not take this church for granted. There are many forces that have other plans for this land, indeed plans for your soul. God's spirit is strong here because of the prayers, hymns, messages of all that have come before and all who are here now. God's spirit is strong in you because all of that forms you...forms you into one who, when life takes its difficult turns, will stand up and say for all to hear, "God keeps God's promises."

You have brought your first fruits that the Lord has given you. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: