

SERMON- Lent 1 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

March 9, 2025

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

OPENING:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” reads our Old Testament lesson. I am going to preach on that reading from Deuteronomy this morning and tell you two stories about modern-day wandering Arameans.

First story: I got an email yesterday out of the blue from a woman who said she and her husband were going to come to our church today, to St. Timothy's, as she was visiting her daughter who lives in the area.

She lives in Bat Cave, NC and attends the Episcopal Church there, which is called the Church of the Transfiguration. That's the church, you might recall, that we supported last year after the devastating hurricanes in North Carolina.

Carlann is a 21st century “wandering Aramean”, having such devastation wrought on her church and the surrounding community, she and her fellow parishioners and the people in that region have experienced something like what Moses and the Israelites. They know what it's like to be afflicted and treated harshly, but...

She ended her email, though, by saying that the money that was given to them by us and other churches, allowed their church to use it to support their community, their neighbors, those in need around them..

“First fruits” indeed.

DEUTERONOMY

That journey, from bondage, then into the wilderness, and out of it, into liberation and the land of milk and honey. That's also what Lent is all about. We start by reminding ourselves that we are dust, that we are incapable without God, and that we need to repent, to strip ourselves of our trappings, to find out who we really are, and more importantly who God is to us.

We don't want to go on that journey (in Lent or in life) but such IS life.

Moses, in our lesson today, tells us the very words that we should use, as we do that, to present ourselves to the Lord. To help us in times of distress and times of plenty as we offer ourselves up to God.

The observant among you might have read ahead in our service to find out that we are going to say those words together, later, right before Communion.

Moses instructs the Israelites that you are to say this at the altar: ‘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.”

These are perhaps the most important words in the Old Testament.¹

It's the story of the Exodus and the Covenant; it's the story of the Israelites, but it's also OUR story.

We are then to say, according to Moses: “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 to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

And ends with: “So **now** I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.”²

We will read that, together, liturgically, at the Offertory, as the plates are presented. I included them in our service because I want us to remember, in this Lenten season, how we might present ourselves to God.

And to do so by jarring our very selves, our very souls and bodies in front of our Creator, to remember who we are, and where we came from.

Sometimes in Episcopal churches, at that moment of the offertory, we say: “All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.”³

This is the same idea as Moses' words, only shorter.

(At St. Tim's, we usually say nothing by the way.)

But today we are going to say this whole bit, printed on page 10/9.

Cowherd is going off script,

the Great Litany was not enough, apparently, to get us into our Lenten mood.

We will see how it feels,

maybe we will keep doing it during this season.

LENT:

WHY? You might ask.

Because we need reminding.

All “this” is not ours. We came, in fact, from nothing and from nowhere.

We need to remind ourselves of Moses' words, that we are sojourners in the wilderness, pilgrims on the way, exiles in a foreign land. It all started with Adam

¹ Fuller, Reginald. 1984. *Preaching the Lectionary*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 405.

² Deuteronomy 26:5-10.

³ 1st Chronicles 29:14

and Eve, and it continues through the Biblical story, up until this very day. We are flawed, broken, and prone to wandering. We needed to be reminded, in the vernacular of the American South, if Biblical Scripture is too foreign to you: “don’t get above your raisin’.”

Now, in emphasizing this, I am not speaking to you as Americans, although I could be, nor am I speaking to you as well-heeled Episcopalians, although I could be, I am not speaking to you as middle class 21st century post-religious morally autonomous free agents, although I could be.

I am speaking to you, and myself (!), as human beings, as dust, as sinful, mortal human beings.

Deuteronomy reminds us that

We are nothing but snake food, we are dust, we came from nowhere.

Jacob/ Abraham came from.... Aram... where is that? NEVER. HEARD. OF. IT.

When we knock on the door, when we present our offerings, our pledges, our gifts, We acknowledge some essential truths: that I didn’t pull myself up from my Bootstraps, that I did not get here because I was really good at life or at work, or at my relationships, or at my Lenten disciples.

We need to be saying:

I came from nowhere. I am from public housing, I am from a dysfunctional family, I am from God knows where,

I got here by God’s grace.

Now, our culture cannot fathom such a posture, presenting ourselves to God like that. It’s perceived as overly morose, a vestige of Medieval penitence, out of touch with the sunniness that our culture insists on. But... maybe it’s true.

Here in Lent, perhaps it’s time to tell that truth.

SHIFT:

We have all won the lottery, in some combination, to live in this great country, to be members of this community, to be worshipping in the Episcopal Church.

But it was not always that way, and it won’t always be that, so we remind ourselves each week by the Confession and once yearly with the Great Litany and Ash Wednesday and in this Season of Lent with this intentional focus on our sinfulness and our brokenness.

It’s all there to help us remember.

Second story, this one is a little tougher.

Many of you will remember Franklin Morales, our former Latino Supply Priest. Father Franklin left us a few years back to go work for the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, as their Canon for Latino/ Hispanic Ministries.

Franklin is the very definition of a wandering Aramean. Years ago, he fled his native country of Venezuela as a political and religious refugee, because he spoke out against the Church and the government there. He found himself in DC as a Lutheran pastor, and then as an Episcopal priest here.

I recently learned that his Visa has been revoked by our government and, despite every attempt by the Diocese in North Carolina and immigration lawyers down there, He will have to leave the United States. He cannot go back to his country of origin, so he is looking for employment elsewhere and some place that he can move himself and his family.

He is going to be okay.

The Episcopal Church is well-connected and he is looking for jobs in Canada, and even in Rome.

I tell that story not so that you feel angry at our government, although you might be, nor so you feel sorry for Franklin, although you should be, but so that you acknowledge that that could be you. That in some way, shape or form, that we are connected to all the wandering Arameans out there, especially to the ones whom we share a community and a church with.

CONCLUSION

So how do we remember that?

We remember it by saying those words later in the service

We remember it by giving away what we have been given.

We remember it by giving up whatever is blocking our paths to God, by telling the truth.

that “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.”

And to tell the truth that echoes in the words of our Collect

“as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save...”

AMEN