

5 November 2023

Remembrance Deuteronomy 26:1-11

We read Deuteronomy 26:1-11:

26 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, ²you 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. ³You 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.' ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The 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; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Then 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.

Among the Maori people of Aotearoa, New Zealand, there is a tradition for formally introducing yourself, especially on ceremonial occasions. It's called the *pepeha*, and it has multiple elements, to be presented in a strict order: what mountain you belong to, what river or body of water you belong to, how you came to this place (by boat or plane, for instance), what tribe you belong to, what clan within that tribe you belong to, where you are from now, who your parents are, and last of all, your own name. There are several things worth noting in that formal introduction. Most strikingly, my name – my individuality – is the last thing to be mentioned, as the detail of least importance. What comes first? Not me or even my family, but the land to which I belong (not, you'll note, the land that belongs to me). Try to do this for yourself. It's so foreign to our way of thinking that it might take some puzzling. It did for me. What mountain do I belong to? I'm from a tropical island by way of Oklahoma: not really mountain country. But on reflection, I do remember that there's a sort of large hill in central Singapore, a national park covered with rain forest, and I did live near it for a time, and that time was a formative time in my life. So, my *pepeha* might be something like this: My mountain is Bukit Timah of Singapore, and my river is the Straits of Malacca. I am an American, though, who came to this land from my childhood in Singapore by plane. I am from the Morris and Phillips clans of Oklahoma, and I live in Wisconsin now. My parents are Russell and May. My name is Jerry.

In America, and generally in western society, we reverse this. We lead with our names, then follow that up with more information about ourselves: our jobs or current homes. The

pepeha begins with our history and heritage and formative influences, clearly assuming that all that must be known first if we are ever to know the individual. Our reading today from Deuteronomy 26 makes the same assumption. This passage describes a ceremonial occasion, the bringing of first fruits to the altar of God, and the one bringing the offering is given a formal speech to make that begins with the Israelite forefather Jacob: “My father was a wandering Aramean, who went down to Egypt and lived there as a foreigner, few in number . . .” Then he tells how the people were pressed into slavery, and how their cries were heard by the Lord, who brought them out of Egypt “with a mighty hand and outstretched arm.” Then the speech tells how the Lord brought his ancestors into that land of promise, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Only then does the speaker tell what he is doing: “And from that land that the Lord has given to his people, I bring these gifts now.” The language of this speech is formalized, filled with familiar phrases found in the Psalms, and is recited verbatim. The great German Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad calls this the oldest confession of faith in scripture, sort of the Apostle’s Creed of ancient Israel.

Like the Maori *pepeha*, this introduction is not about the speaker but about his heritage. Descriptions of his family and the land God had given them both appear long before he says anything about himself. But this introduction is also different from the *pepeha*. The center of the Deuteronomy confession is a story, a story of slavery in Egypt, of deliverance by God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm, and of being brought to the land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey. The Maori introduction says, “I was shaped by this land and this people.” The Deuteronomy introduction says, “I was shaped by this deliverance, this great work of God.”

So what might be our formal introduction as followers of Christ, assuming we’re able to put our individual identities last? We might use pieces of both introductions, but I think that, like the ancient Hebrews, we would center on the story of our deliverance. Maybe something like this: I am from a people made in God’s own image, created to walk a path of love for God and for others. But my people wandered far from that path and disfigured that holy image, so that we bound ourselves in slavery to false gods. But God heard our cries and, delivered us by sending his only begotten Son, that whoever should trust in him should be set free. My mountain is the mountain of God, for my citizenship is in heaven, and my river is the river of life that flows from the throne of God. My tribe is the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, and my clan is the people called Methodists. My family is the community on Lake Street. My name is Jerry.

As I say, this is not how we usually think in our culture, putting our past before our present and future. We are individualists first, and if we ever think about how our identities have been shaped by our heritage, our circumstances, our ancestors, it tends to be an afterthought. In fact, if people try to remind us how our present was shaped by our past, it sometimes makes us uncomfortable, and so we ban those books. But on All Saints Sunday, of all Sundays in the year, we followers of Christ remember that we are not the featured soloists, but part of a grand choir. We stop looking ahead toward our individual goals, and we pause in remembrance of those who have gone before us. This story is our story, and these people, these saints, represent our tribe, our clan, our family. Their lives shaped not only who we are, but who we can become. The ancient Hebrews knew this. The Maori people still do. Today, briefly at least, we remember.

Today when we light candles for those who have died in the past year, and as we read the names of those who have left their marks on our lives, we do not just celebrate them as individuals. We acknowledge that they constitute our own background, the Communion of Saints to which we belong. They are not just those “who have gone before”; they are fellow travelers

with us from slavery to deliverance, our Promised Land, our mountain, our river. Their lights continue to light our paths. Today we remember that we are not alone. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we bring you our grief.

Today we remember those we love and see no more.

But also, we bring you our gratitude.

For those who taught us to walk, both in body and in faith.

For those whose example we observed and sought to emulate.

For those who fought battles for justice before us, on whose victories we stand,
and whose partial victories we seek to complete.

We thank you for the saints who have made both us and the path that remains to us.
grant that we may, like them, inspire and lead others in your ways. Amen.