

(Deuteronomy 26:1-11 RSV)

<sup>1</sup> "When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. <sup>3</sup> And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our forbears to give us.' <sup>4</sup> Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> "And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my forbear; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. <sup>6</sup> And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried to the LORD the God of our forbears, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; <sup>8</sup> and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; <sup>11</sup> and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

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## Ever a Wanderer

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

Date: March 4, 2001

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Text: *Deuteronomy 26:1-11*

I have to tell you, God must have been pretty angry at the people Israel. 40 years God made them wander lost in the desert. By my calculation it is about 300 miles from Memphis Egypt to Jerusalem. Even if they covered just 2 miles a day, it should have taken just 5 months to go from Nile to the Jordan River. Said another way, in the 40 years it took the Israelites to make the trip, they should have been able to make the trip a hundred times over. That's really lost. When they finally got there, it must have been a relief. It must have been a bit of an embarrassment, too.

“So, where are you all coming from?”

“Egypt.”

“Really, how are things in Egypt?”

“Well, we don't really know. We left quite a while ago.”

“Really? How long ago was that?”

“Let's see. According to my Franklin Planner it's been, what, 40 years? Yes, that's right. It's been 40 years.”

“Whew, you must have been really lost. Another bunch just came up from Egypt in 5 months. Didn't you guys ever ask anyone for directions?”

“No. We didn't have time to ask directions. We didn't really need them anyway.”

So, you see men have changed very little in the last 4,000 years. They never did stop and ask for directions.

But joking aside, it appears that this extended time in the desert was somehow important. Because we can well imagine that the people would have been glad to put it behind them. Once they had gone through that awful passage, once they had reached their goal, once they had occupied and prospered in the promised land, surely there would be no good reason to recall their wandering past. When they were sitting on the throne of riches, why would they wish to recall their humiliating wanderings in the wilderness.

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And yet Moses' instructions to the people are to do just that. And they are not only to remember their journey from Egypt. They are to remember all the way back to Abraham, Abraham, who spent his whole lifetime wandering at God's command. The people are instructed to remember their wandering heritage:

A wandering Aramean was my forbear; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the LORD the God of our forbears, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

In the first case this requirement to remember is that the people remain properly thankful to God. This passage marks a very early Israelite harvest ritual in which the people come and give God a portion of their bounty in acknowledgment of what God had done for them. It is the origin of our own practice of tithing and offering, in which we return to God a portion of what has come to us in gratitude for God's graciousness.

But there is something even more significant at play in this passage. The Israelites greatest dream was of the promised land, a land flowing with milk on honey. The whole idea of the promised land is that of Utopia. The promised land was to be a place where everything would be perfect and abundant. It was the destination, the end point, the land of unchanging flawlessness.

But even to this day the promised land has remained elusive. In the reading Hugh McIntosh used a few weeks back, we learned that the land was already occupied by a strong people, who were certainly not going to roll over and play dead. History bears that out. It took a very long time for Israel to establish herself. And things were never easy. The promised land never became flawless. There were always a million problems. Read Joshua and Judges. Read Samuel and Kings. It was never Club Med in the promised land. Even Israel's highpoint was a mixed bag. Surely the highpoint of Israel's autonomy and power came under David, but his empire barely outlived him. And his own life was anything but perfection.

Any honest account of the history of Israel will have to admit that it was largely a history of ebbs and flows, wandering and flux. From Abraham to Egypt, from Moses to Canaan, from David to Assyria and Babylon and Greece and Rome, Israel's heroes and Israel's history is a saga of motion, of roaming lost and yearning to be found.

In a sense the history must seem to be a disappointment. The promises of God going all the way back to Abraham – whom God told that his descendants would number as the stars and would possess the land – God's promises to Israel never seem to quite pan out. And curiously, this morning's passage tells the Israelites that when it does seem to have panned out, when they are in the land and

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on top of the world, they are to remember that they come from a wanderer, that a wandering Aramean was their forbear, that they themselves in their bones and in their hearts are wanderers still.

Later, in the early Christian church, the followers of Jesus struggled with a similar reality. Jesus, the Messiah, had come. Jesus had died and been resurrected. The Holy Spirit had stirred all Jerusalem at Pentecost. And yet, the end times, the new era, the kingdom of God did not dawn. As time went on, this became a huge problem. Today, 2000 years later, it is hard for us to understand that the early Christians were certain that the rapture would follow closely on the heels of the resurrection. Easter was not the end of the story for them, but it was instead the beginning of the new era. But second coming didn't come. And when some of the faithful Christians died, faithful Christians who were absolutely sure that this roaring return of Jesus would happen in their lifetime, those who were left were left trying to figure out what went wrong.

My guess about what went wrong is that God's people have a hearing problem. Or maybe, as Paul suggests in First Corinthians, God's people are often not ready for solid food, and so they are fed a softer, more easily digestible version. Whether the people mis-hear God, or whether God gives people what they need or want to hear until they are ready for more probably makes little difference. But what seems clear, if you read between the lines, is that while God's people were always looking toward a time and a land when and where everything is glorious, God is always trying to make the picture more profound, even if more puzzling.

In a sense there is little difference between the promised land of the ancient Israelites, the end times hoped for by the early Christians and most notions today of what heaven is like. In all instances a rather boring static reality is imagined. There's the old joke that if heaven is harp playing angels sitting in clouds, tell me more about the other option. The Garden of Eden should have made it clear that for better or worse God's people were not meant for such an existence, nor had any tolerance for it, either.

The early Christians began to work out a way to deal with the delay of Jesus' reappearance. Though they never gave up the idea he would return, they adopted a more positive understanding of the in between time in which they lived, the time in between Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the kingdom. Modern scholars developed a wonderful phrase to capture this in between moment the early Christians found themselves in. They called it the already-but-not-yet. In the already-but-not-yet time Jesus' resurrection had brought new life and fulfillment, even though it had not yet come to full completion. There was still work to do and more to come.

Maybe this is the solid food. Maybe the already-but-not-yet is not only the truth in which God calls us to live, but maybe it is the reality in which God knows

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we are at our best. God gets worried whenever the people get thinking too much about living in full glory. When James and John wanted to sit with Jesus in heaven, Jesus pointed them to trouble he was going to go through and warned them that this was what it meant to sit on his right and left. And it was not just a warning, but it was also a pointer to what was important. When James and John got to thinking about seats in glory, Jesus was certain that they had disassociated from the work of the kingdom in this place. He told them that here and now was what was important. The already-but-not-yet meant that by being Jesus' disciples truly, they would ever strive in this world to promote the realm of God.

I am convinced that God was always suspicious of actually getting to where you were trying to go, of actually ending up in the promised land. The fact that God's people have spent so little time there confirms God's ambivalence. And this morning's reading from the ancient creed tells us that whenever they are there, the people are to remember that in their veins courses the blood of the wanderer, the one always on the way. A wandering Aramean was my forbear.

The litany of problems with being in the promised land is legion, and they are particularly poignant for us in the United States here at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Again, recall the time of David, the time that the Israelites remembered as the time when they were the closest to possessing an existence of milk and honey.

In this era grew the pride of privilege. David, the heralded king, understood his power to allow him to have his best commander killed so David could possess his wife. Kings after David would follow each their own corruptions. Ultimately Israel's history would become a depressing saga of disgraceful kings clawing impotently to keep what they had. Forgotten was any idea of where they had come from. And so the prophets spoke to closed ears about the poor and the widow, and shouted without effect, Treat the sojourner well, for you were once a sojourner in the land of Egypt yourself.

It seems a human inclination to want to get where are going, and once there to bar the doors and make sure we keep what we've got. But alas, it does us so much harm to do so. We become dull and tedious. We become corrupt and slow. We forget where we came from and who we are.

Throughout our religious history God has offered us another choice, another way of being. God offered and offers us an already-but-not-yet way of being. Already because from the beginning God has been with us, God has guided us, God has supported us, and God has pushed us into the wilderness that we might transform it and ourselves. Our mistake is to think there is an end to the journey. For once we believe we have arrived, the dynamism of already-but-not-yet disappears. But like those ancient people in the desert, you are ever a wanderer. It is your best self. And so, each day, even as you count your blessings, recite, "A

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wandering Aramean was my forbear, and I too am a wanderer in God's land of the already-but-not-yet."

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