

## **Sermon Text – Sunday, March 6, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**First Reading: Luke 4:1-13, Second reading: Romans 10:8b-13, Scripture for Responsive Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

These words from Deuteronomy are instructions to the Israelite community for showing appropriate gratitude to God, once they had settled in the land God was giving them. This would be some future event to occur after they had occupied and settled the land, it would not happen while there was still land left to occupy. Moses recalls God's instructions for offering 'Firstfruits and Tithes' in gratitude for God's presence through all the times of trial and wandering.

God, through Moses directed instructions to both the corporate or communal "You" and to the individual "you" – they were to express gratitude for God's blessing of safe space and land to dwell and care for. Notice this practice starts with a declaration and acknowledgement that the land is the fulfillment of God's promise to their ancestors. The practice then continues with a remembrance of the past trials and God's care through these trials. Finally, they must acknowledge their blessings once again and rejoice that the land is a gift from God.

This is a simple act of remembrance of the blessings God has bestowed on the people of Israel. Through this act the people acknowledge that their blessings are gifts from God and make the appropriate response in gratitude. God's prescription here is not for sacrifices on the altar but of the proper way to give thanks and to "rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given" (verse 11). Their offerings of firstfruits and tithes are an expression of gratitude. In addition, this was the occasion for rejoicing with the entire community, even with Levites and foreigners whose inheritance did not provide the ability to offer firstfruits.

We must draw on our memories of some of the bible stories of our youth to get a sense of how God provided for these people. How God leads Abraham and promises him the land, how God promises to bless Abraham and make of him a great nation. When God asked Abraham to show his faith by sacrificing his son on an altar, God provided an alternative – thus keeping the promise that Abraham's offspring would become a great nation. Then, the fact that the people were in Egypt at all was the result of God's provision of shelter for Jacob's family during a period of famine (Recall the story of Joseph from Genesis). Further, after many decades [centuries even] of oppression and Pharaoh's rule, God again provided escape for the people through Moses' actions (read Exodus).

As the people escaped Egypt, God provided a safe crossing through the parting of the Red Sea and sheltered them day and night in a cloud like pillar of fire. While they

wandered in the wilderness God provided bread [manna], meat [quail], and fresh water for the people. Additionally, God provides for the people instructions for living together as a community, laws that would help them become a peaceable nation, and instructions for proper worship. As noted in the scripture we read, God's way for expressing gratitude included "the Levites and the foreigners residing among you". This is not a celebration for the Israelites to feel special and singled out but a celebration that includes all even those who did not possess land. These were provisions for the entire community – a way to ensure all were able to rejoice. These things are a fulfillment of God's promises to humanity going all the way back to the Ark and Rainbow.

In our scripture from the Gospel of Luke this morning we read another well known story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Jesus had been fasting for forty days before his adversary 'the devil' began the temptations. Jesus drew his strength from remembering the words of scripture and he recalled God's promises and provisions of care to counter his attacker. For Jesus, in the wilderness, God was a refuge and fortress.

So, what does any of that have to do with us today? That's a good question especially if you consider the promises God made to Abraham only relevant to the people of Israel. What do the promises mean to us and our lives today? We are centuries removed from the restrictions and regulations given to the people through the Torah and recorded in Deuteronomy. Besides, Jesus came and through God's actions on the cross established a new covenant. Should we no longer recall God's provisions of protection, mercy, grace, and forgiveness?

But I wonder, are we really supposed to forget everything God did for God's people before Jesus? Is it possible that as we recall God's deeds, in the same way this offering of firstfruits asked the Israelites to do, we find more grace and strength in the face of our trials? We don't have to be a "what have you done for me lately" people, but a people that can look at scripture and remember God was always present with God's people and is still present for us to call on for strength and shelter. Just as God blessed the nation of Israel by caring for the people who were wandering in the wilderness, God also blesses and cares for us through the body of Christ.

There you go, we are the body of Christ – the church. The purpose of the church is to do what Jesus did in the world and continue to fulfill God's promises. How do we do that? We know how – bring good news to the poor, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and elderly, feed the hungry, and the list gets longer. The church, as the body of Christ, is the avenue for God's blessings to continue in this world and for the community to feel God's presence. For any of these things to happen however, the church needs more than just people writing checks the church needs people acting.

We know this, yet; we are not active. This church lacks leaders. I can name on one hand the people who lead in this congregation. You yourselves know there is a shortage when you see the same faces every Sunday leading in worship and performing

the usual rituals that make our worship together meaningful. The mission statement of this church is “to honor God, share the love of the Christ, and change lives ministering grace and peace.” We are not being the church we proclaim to be in our current state because we are not adequately sharing the love of Christ since we do not have enough people to help with the ministry of grace and peace.

I acknowledge that when things need doing around and for the church and this congregation, people volunteer – the same people consistently and that is wonderful. You are the people who can rejoice. What I want to talk about however is how we are being the body of Christ to this community – and to the others in our congregation who need tangible things. How are we being the body of Christ to the lonely or the sick? How are we being the body of Christ to each other in more tangible ways? How are we the hands and feet of Christ, meeting people and ministering to them where they are?

During these weeks of Lent leading up to our celebration of the Lord’s resurrection, I want to explore just how we remember God’s promise of presence and fulfill that promise to the community around us. It is true that in every congregation there are people set apart for the tasks of ministry and outreach, there are people set apart to take care of the church finances making sure that your contributions have the intended effect of keeping the building secure and the lights turned on, and there are people set apart to lead the worship services. These people enable the church to carry out God’s provision of care for the community and for the congregation.

It just seems that in the season leading up to Lent this year we have had several reminders of what it means to be the body of Christ – how we are the hands, feet, eyes, ears, and heart of Christ to the world. And now, more than ever, the world needs Christ – the world needs to feel the love of Christ, the mercy, grace, and forgiveness offered at the cross. That happens through us, through the body of Christ. When we think of those people this message from Deuteronomy addressed, we can understand why it was important they set aside rituals for offering firstfruits in gratitude for God’s presence. God guided and protected them through the wilderness. Those were some tough times with tough lessons, but God was with them through the wandering.

But in our world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are the ones who not only need to feel God’s presence but also, we are the ones revealing God’s presence to our neighbors. There are people in this church and in our community who have been and are struggling. Wandering in a wilderness created by our culture, maybe by bad choices, or through circumstances beyond their control. We can be the body of Christ to these people, fulfilling our mission statement by ministering grace and peace.

The promise is that just as God’s presence was with the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness, God will be with us in our wilderness journeys. God will strengthen and guide us as we attempt to minister to our neighbors and as we become

Christ for our neighbors and each other. God's provisions of care do not end when we leave worship, God's presence is not only with us as individuals but with the community. God will make a way for this church – as we go through a process of discernment God creates streams in the desert and paths through the wilderness.

I think this scripture reminds us that God's provisions and promises are for the benefit of the entire community, the foreigners among us. Maybe the concept presented here is that all rejoice together. Carolyn Sharp in her commentary on this passage of Deuteronomy writes a reminder for us, "The landless Levite and stranger are to be included in the jubilant celebration, something that demonstrates care for those who remain vulnerable in this community" (26). As we worship God and express gratitude for God's provisions and promises fulfilled in our life, we must also consider those who do not have access to "firstfruits." God's message to us through this passage is that maybe there are some who still wander in the wilderness, not having found the land to settle in. Those are the people who need to feel God's presence and they are the ones with whom we share our blessings.

I would like to see more people from this congregation take up Christ's yoke and serve each other and the community. I think it is possible for this church to be the body of Christ to this neighborhood and beyond. "We come together as the church of Jesus Christ to do this. We are devoted to a mission whose benefits are not for us alone. This is our opportunity to share in important work in this community and around the world" (from *Life in Liturgy*, Lent 1C, published by WV-PA Disciples). My vision is that we can develop elders and deacons who can serve this church and this congregation for the future – not only one or two faces but, like that picture of the body of Christ hanging in the back of our sanctuary. If you haven't looked closely at it, the picture is the faces of many people in this congregation that make up the body of Christ. All of us – working together, sharing the love of Christ and ministering grace and peace to the community.