

First Sunday in Lent

FROM AFFLICTION TO CELEBRATION

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

1When 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 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. 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.

DIAGNOSIS: This Is All a Wandering Aramean Can Amount to...

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Our Affliction*

This text gives liturgical instructions for those who have “made it” and arrived in the Promised Land. Isn’t that us? As Americans, even in a recession, we have a standard of living beyond what most human beings who have walked the planet could have imagined. As Lutherans, we inhabit a doctrinal tradition sublime within Christendom. We have become “a great nation, mighty and populous” (v. 5)! And yet, we are still wandering, aren’t we? We remain socially, psychologically, and spiritually disjointed and disconnected. And if truth be told, we are ecclesiastically conflicted as well. For all our having made it, we are afflicted.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Our Toil*

Thus, we work so very hard. We press on to make it all come together. Churchly appeals to get along and dig deeper, the hefting of our own psychological bootstraps, and political agitating are all expressions of the same impulse. We relentlessly strive to alleviate our affliction however we can. Forgetting the smallness of a wandering Aramean, we believe that the only power through which we can find solutions is our own. We are blind to any work above and beyond our own. Combine this with our aversion to affliction, and we become unwilling and unable to see that the Lord might actually have a hand in our disenchantment. So, we press on, using all our powers to try to find a way out of our afflictions, never seriously questioning

why it is that we can never quite succeed.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Our Oppression*

But it isn't just futile. In all our labor on our own, we have set ourselves in opposition to the Lord. Yes, we have good intentions. But as we saw above, they are our intentions, carried out in our efforts. They are not the Lord's will or work. So we must face the truth that Israel had to acknowledge: it was, indeed, the Lord who brought them to Egypt in the first place. It is the Lord, then, who has brought us into this place of affliction and toil. Our labors, our intentions will be brought to nothing here. It is only reasonable to fear and expect, then, that we will be blotted out as well by these strange workings of the Lord.

PROGNOSIS: But This Is All that God Can Do with a Wandering Aramean!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Brought Out*

The Lord didn't just arrange the sojourn in Egypt; he also created the Exodus out of slavery. And just as the Lord did for Israel what it could never do for itself, so too did Jesus accomplish for us that which we could never attain on our own. He overcame all the wiles and weapons of the tempter, placing his faith fully in the Father's work and not his own efforts. In Christ, the Lord does a new thing: a saving work for us, even when we are dead in our own self-chosen labors. His love overcomes our failed self-reliance and transfers us out of slavery and oppression.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Remembering and Confessing*

This means that now our "work" is to trust in what Jesus has done for us. The Deuteronomist calls us to remember and confess God's salvation. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" becomes

an attitude of joyful dependence on the Lord. Struggles become the furnace in which our efforts are burned away, purifying Christ's work in us. Instead of toiling for an end to afflictions, we can rely on the Holy Spirit's power to refine and renew us through them, displaying his mighty power in our weakness.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Giving Offerings and Celebrating*

The habits of generosity (first fruits giving) and celebrating (even with the "aliens" who are not, yet , of the household of the faith) are wonderful ways of living out that dependence. Giving sacrificially of our resources is an act of trust that the Lord who saves is a Lord who provides. And, if we can talk about throwing parties during Lent, celebrating all that God has done is as counter-cultural as one can be in our afflicted, toiling world. Why not laugh (at the devil!) during those good Lutheran soup suppers? And invite some who do not yet know the Lord. Let them see some carefree joy. Let them soak in an atmosphere of people who don't need to be in control and on top of things. Let them see a new way of handling afflictions: the labors of the Lord, rather than our own efforts. Perhaps they, too, will be moved to believe and confess!