

# First Sunday in Lent, Old Testament, Year C

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## A FRAGRANT OFFERING

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

First Sunday of Lent

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

1 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, 2 you 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. 3 You 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." 4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, 5 you 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. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 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; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 So 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. 11 Then 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: Making an Offering**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): First Fruits**

Deuteronomy is Moses' final (last ditch?) effort to remind the people of Israel that God wants a fresh dynamic relationship with them. Moses reminds the people of the circumstances under which they received the Law: in the wilderness. He reiterates the contents of that Law as a covenant between the people and God. And he emphasizes how necessary it is for them to follow that Law if they want to truly benefit from their relationship with God. So, in thanksgiving for the Law, Moses enjoins the people to celebrate all these things by giving their first fruits as a way to acknowledge all that they've received from God. (Here he describes the liturgy for the Festival of Weeks.)

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Not Quite Ripe**

No doubt the people wanted to take Moses seriously when he first invoked these words. After all, they had been liberated from slavery, given a relationship of freedom and forgiveness with God, brought into the land that God had promised. But our human

brains can only hold on to such details for so long. No wonder Moses now prescribes that these memories be ritualized in a festival. Perhaps he thought, if we remind each other publicly, maybe if we speak the words out loud in worship, we will remain faithful. (Or maybe the words would become as idle as most good intentions do.)

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Something Rotten**

God knows we are forgetful creatures. It took Adam and Eve no just a few days in Eden to forget to avoid that fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. So we shouldn't be surprised to hear that despite the rituals (perhaps these rituals actually came into being because the people had forgotten God's goodness and failed to give thanks?), the people weren't thankful. They succumbed (as we do also) to the temptation to forget, to look for an easier way. They tempted God. And God knows when he smells rotten fruit.

### **PROGNOSIS: Being an Offering**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): First Fruits**

But what if there were a human one so committed to God's goodness that he not only remembered God's word but lived it? Look at another wanderer in the wilderness, Jesus—led there by the Spirit even, and you will hear a different ending to this narrative of God's relationship to his people. See Jesus square off with the devil, who uses the same stuff that tempted the

Israelites to look only to their own need: Jesus is as susceptible to temptation as any other human, but refuses Satan's wooing. Instead, he looks directly over Satan's shoulder, ignores his own satisfaction, and acts on behalf of all us other human ones. Jesus—who will not “live by bread alone,” or serve himself, or test God—is tested for 40 days. And even when a more opportune time comes for Satan to test him, on the cross, he would rather be faithful to his Father and to us, than serve his own purposes.

Now that's a living Word, sharp and active. Jesus doesn't just recite God's desires, he embodies them selflessly. And we receive the first fruits of his effort: Resurrection.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Ripe Faith**

Certainly Christ's goodness deserves ritual remembrance. Like Israel who remembers her liberation from Egypt, all of us who have reaped the benefits of Christ's liberating death and resurrection have much to remember—together, out loud, in acts of worship. But what Christ has done is not just words. He is the Word, written on our hearts, marked on our brows—closer than any words on a page could ever be. And in him, who was led into and then left the wilderness full of the Holy Spirit, we know faith. He is worth more to us than words and rituals and acts of gratitude.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): A Fragrant Offering**

Jesus who offered himself, in the wilderness and on the cross, makes himself an offering for us that we might be an offering

for the world. Not so that we might “make” an offering to the world, but so that we may truly *be* an offering. Full of the Holy-ing Spirit that Christ has breathed on his followers ever since the resurrection we are fruit for the world. Sweet.