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Waterford Mennonite Church
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Lent 1: Deuteronomy 26:1-11 – God’s Hand Delivers Us
Sermon – “The Temptation, Trial and Tragedy”

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. It is the liturgical season of the church that is set aside as a time of preparing for Easter. In the early church this season of Lent was used to prepare individuals to receive the sacrament of baptism on Easter morning. Now, we often view these 40 days as space for self-examination and reflection to discern areas of our lives in need of Christ’s healing, forgiveness, and restoration.

Sometimes within this context of Lent we consider letting go of something for the next 40 days, or a way to include fasting, or at least fasting from a particular item or food as a means to draw us deeper into prayerful reflection. Lent creates the space, and sets the rhythm of time to slow down, to breathe deeply, to take a soul inventory, to become reoriented. To become reoriented to the table at the Last Supper, the cross of Good Friday, and the empty tomb on glorious Easter morning. Each and every year we join Jesus and his disciples on this journey - a journey that leads inward to reflection, and onward as we too anticipate the coming events.

During this specific season of Lent we will be joining with other Mennonite Churches across the country and in Canada in dwelling with the theme “Blessed Hunger, Holy Feast.” The planners described the theme by recognizing that “Throughout the Scriptures for this Lenten season, a theme of human emptiness recurs in contrast to the satisfaction and fulfillment God longs to provide for us. God’s people are portrayed enduring difficult times – hungry and thirsty, often lost and away from the safety of home. At the same time, God’s people find their most basic needs met in God’s abundance – they find their needs fulfilled by means of a feast that only

God can provide! “Blessed hunger, holy feast” articulates the truth found in these passages of Scripture.”ⁱ

This morning then we begin our Lenten journey by turning to Deuteronomy. Now this fascinating book “is presented as a single long sermon from Moses... (and) Today’s reading is the conclusion of the covenant laws that comprise the heart of the book.”ⁱⁱ Picking up our text in chapter 26 though is like trying to read a book by just randomly turning to a page in the middle of it. Our passage concludes a much larger passage that actually began clear back in chapter 12. So as we get into our text I invite you to first turn with me chapter 12. Here in verse 1 then we begin to set the context for our passage as well. Here we read “These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess – as long as you live in the land.” The text goes on then to speak about *worship*. How *they* should worship. Where *they* should worship. What should be included in *their* worship. And very critical, *who they* are called to worship. We can hear echoes of the Shema from chapter 6 – “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all you soul and with all your strength.” It is in this context of communal worship and communal remembering in which our text for today emerges.

Now turning to chapter 26 we can now see the connection back to chapter 12. Here in chapter 26 the opening words parallel the opening words of chapter 12 - “When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it...” Now there is an important nuisance that we don’t get the luxury of seeing in the English translation. If we pulled out our Hebrew Bibles we would be able to detect that back in chapter 12, which was addressed to the community as well, the verbs are in the plural. So at the beginning of this discourse unit “The people are called to this new commitment of worship and

shared life together.” Verbs and pronouns are all plural. However if we had our Hebrew Bibles open we would then be able to detect that in chapter 26 the writer has shifted to singular verbs and pronouns.ⁱⁱⁱ What might this change from plural to singular mean? What might the implications be for our broader scripture passage? What might the implications and lessons be for us today? For me, for you?

Well, how do you remember? What do you remember? What narrative of your life do you see, and what narrative of your life do you tell? Does your story, your memory, ever occur in a vacuum apart of anyone else? *How does your individual relationship and journey with God intersect, overlap, and intertwine with that of the faith community’s relationship and journey with God?*

We begin with the question of how and what do we remember. In verse 5 of chapter 26 we are instructed “Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean...” The next several verses could be described as a confession of faith, a structured narrative.^{iv} One scholar summarizes by stating that the “community of faith remembers itself by recounting its story.”^v **The temptation, the trial, the tragedy is to forget the story.**

My beloved grandfather had Alzheimer’s disease. It is incredibly painful to watch a loved one forget who you are, and even more so to watch them forget who they are. The writers of Deuteronomy understood the temptation, the trial, and the tragedy to forget our story, to forget our identity. They understood it so well that over 30 times in this book we find “admonitions to remember and to teach the story of God’s past faithfulness and commands... a drum beat so insistent that the reader senses that Moses knew that the people once settled would forget themselves and their God.”^{vi}

Here God's people are instructed to remember and to tell the story as individuals. And yet that story holds corporate dimensions and is retold within the setting of communal worship. This suggests that "even as each individual makes his or her own way to worship, the journey and the experience are enwrapped in the story of the community, even as the experience is enshrouded in the presence of God." vii

What might this change from plural to singular mean? What might the implications be for our broader scripture passage? What might the implications and lessons be for us today? For me, for you? I think perhaps it is rather profound even as it is simple. We are each on a journey, and in a relationship with God. And we relate to each other within our faith community. Together we create a narrative when we tell and retell our stories. But not only do we tell and retell our corporate faith story, which does include "My father was a wandering Aramean...", we also tell our individual stories and those stories find place, meaning, and lasting significance within the communal worship. We tell of how we each have experienced God. We tell the stories of when we have experienced hunger, famine, thirst. We tell the stories of when we have experienced manna, feast, and provision. We tell the stories of God's provision, protection, and presence. We overcome the temptation, the trial, and tragedy of forgetting.

During this season of Lent we are going to practice telling and retelling our stories. One way this will emerge within our communal worship is within confession and reconciliation. Each Sunday we will hear from a different congregational member as they share their own confessional response to God, their individual story that is becoming woven into the fabric of our communal identity. As we listen to each of their stories may we each consider our own and find ways to tell those stories too.

Blessed hunger. Holy feast. May God guide each of us, and all of us, on this Lenten journey. May it be so.

ⁱ *Leader: Winter 2018-19* (MennoMedia: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 37.

ⁱⁱ Brian Jones, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 26:1-11,”
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3989

ⁱⁱⁱ W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., “Commentary on Deuteronomy 26:1-11,”
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=517

^{iv} *Leader*, 39.

^v *Leader*, 39.

^{vi} *Leader*, 39.

^{vii} Tucker, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 26:1-11,”
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=517