

**Claim Your Inheritance**

**A Sermon preached for North Presbyterian Church**

**On March 3, 2013 by Cathy M. Kolwey**

We have been on a Lenten journey together and this week of our journey takes us back into the Older Testament to the book of Deuteronomy. I love Deuteronomy because it seems to straddle both the past and the present; it goes between the tradition of old and the needs of the contemporary generation, and switches between revelation and interpretation. In doing so, it becomes this modern text that instructs us on how to become more thoughtful readers of the scriptures.

In narrative terms, Deuteronomy comes to us just as the Israelites, encamped in the plains of Moab, finally stand poised to enter their Promised Land. This entry into Canaan would provide the long awaited climax to the story that began with the promise to the ancestors in Genesis, and whose fulfillment had been delayed by the enslavement in Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

This morning, we find the Israelites nearing the end of their journey. They have escaped from Egypt to freedom. They have wandered in the wilderness. Forty years they have been nomads, relying on manna and God's care to see them through. Imagine that: a slave who escaped from Egypt when she was 25 years old, would be 65 before she would reach the Canaan. It was almost an entire lifetime. Can you imagine? More than half of your life wandering through the wilderness, living a nomadic life, sleeping in tents and not knowing where your next meal comes from.

Again, it is Moses who has been leading these people on this journey. At this point in the story, Moses is about to die. He has to wrestle with the idea that he will never see the Promised Land. I want us to settle on that idea for a minute. Moses' leadership and faithfulness to God called him with the burning bush experience, to be a voice for the Israelite people to the Pharaoh, it brought him to the role of advocate over the issue of enslavement in Egypt, then the plagues, the Passover massacre, the parting of the Red Sea, the ultimate escape, and finally forty years of wandering in the wilderness,

Moses must be exhausted. He has had quite a life. Now as he is on the eve of his own death, Moses has to reconcile with the idea that the Israel nation will enter the Promised Land without him. I wonder what that must have felt like? Did he feel like he had failed because

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, Fourth Edition ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), pageNr. 247

he couldn't they didn't make it all the way? Was he just tired? I mean, he doubted God's call to leadership from the start. I wonder what kind of conversation's he had with his wife, over the idea that he needed to "let it all go" now and how to "pass the baton". It would have been quite the retirement.

Moses responds to this time of reconciling in an interesting way. He seizes the narrative in Deuteronomy, and turns it from the story of the Israelites into his own Magnus opus. In it, he delivers three speeches, linked together to form one long farewell address. In it, he marks the nation's history, he reviews and comments on the laws, and he reminds them (and us) of the importance of loyalty to God. And it is part of this farewell address that is our scripture for this morning. Listen to the advice the Moses bestows upon the Israelites, and how relevant it is for us, even today:

*(Deuteronomy 26: 1-11)*

*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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,<sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.<sup>8</sup> 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;<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> So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me."<sup>11</sup> You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God.<sup>11</sup> 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.*

More than just titheing (or giving of our first fruits), Moses calls us as God's people to do three ADDITIONAL things as a part of our giving, as outlined by this part of Deuteronomy. They are nuances, perhaps, but I believe important points to highlight our calling as the people of God.

First, we are to claim our inheritance. As it says in verse 3, we are "to declare that we have come into the land that God swore to our ancestors". We are to stake a claim. That inheritance is laid out for us in Ephesians 1: 11, which says:

*In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,<sup>[1]</sup> having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,<sup>[2]</sup> so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.*

This means that we will live to glorify God. Knowing Christ and showing Christ is how we will stake our claim, and we will live that truth out in more than just our giving but with our entire being.

Second, we are to name our past. When the scripture says in verse 5 to "respond to the Lord by saying 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor'...." It is referencing Jacob here, reminding them to remember and honor their long and colorful history. We, too, need to honor our histories as well. The idea that Christ makes us whole is most powerful when we can continue to name our brokenness and give honor to the healing ways that restore us to the wholeness that we celebrate.

Third, we are to welcome the stranger among us. We are to practice hospitality. This is a precursor for the New Testament's commandment to love our neighbor. This is the beginning of the radical change in God's message. Up until this time, the Israelites were God's chosen people, called to be set apart. And yet, here is Moses, with the first message of welcoming all as they enter into the Promised Land. The Levites and the aliens would have been groups of people who were on the margins. It would not have been tradition to celebrate with them together in community. But Moses is changing the rules for the Promised Land. Deuteronomy calls us to welcomed the marginalized into the celebration that we experience as well.

And throughout all of these messages is woven this key ideal: that we are to continue to give our first fruits to God – to live with loyalty and faithfulness.

Let me share just one example of claiming an inheritance and giving back the first fruits. It is the story of Bobbie Jo Reed, a woman from Kansas City, MO. Bobbie Jo was a woman who had been walking the streets for many years and had been caught in the trapping of both addiction and exploitation. But in January of 2003, she went through a conversion experience -- getting herself clean and sober, and off the streets. Coincidentally, at the same time that she was converted, her mother died and left her an inheritance. She knew that many of the women who were drug addicts turned to the streets to support their habits. When they were arrested, put in jail and then released, they had no place to go. So they went back to working the streets, because there were no other options for them. So with her inheritance, Bobbie Jo bought an old retirement home. She invited the ladies to come and live there and as they did, she would share the Gospel with them. She called her ministry Healing House. The first home got filled up, gathered some more resources and bought another house. It filled up and she bought another and then an apartment complex. Today, Healing House is a city wide non-profit that houses both men and women trying to leave the life of the streets and break free from their addictions. There are now six homes in the Kansas City area.

At Christmas time, the ladies of Healing House buy presents and then take them to the homeless people on the streets telling them, "This is a Christmas gift for you to remind you that there is still hope and there's a Savior who can save you." One Christmas Eve, they pulled into a gas station to fill up the house van and two police officers were there. One of the officers recognized a girl in the van and walked over and said to her, "What are you doing here? I thought you were dead." He recognized another and then another and said, to all of them, "I thought you all were dead"! Because they were no longer on the streets, he assumed that the worst had happened. Astounded, He called his partner over and showed him the women saying, "Look! They're alive!"

In truth, they were dead: dead in their sins, but now they are alive in Christ. Many women and men from Kansas City have experienced this new life because of the mission of Healing House. This was all because of a woman named Bobbie Jo, who claimed her inheritance, who had the courage to name her past, and who welcomed the stranger into her life, even as she gave her first fruits to God. These men and women are alive because Bobbie Jo Reed followed the direction that Moses gave in our Deuteronomy scripture; words that are alive for us today.

So what does this mean for you? Where is God nudging you this Lenten season? What is the inheritance that you are to claim? As we rejoice in the celebration of God's abundance in our lives, where will you give those first fruits? What will be the legacy that you leave?

As we make this scripture relevant to our own lives this Lenten season, we need to understand that we are on a journey as well, we are wandering in a wilderness that will leads us to an empty tomb, and that we will claim our inheritance Easter morning with the triumph of the resurrection. And if we are to live as a resurrection people, we need to stake a claim on the inheritance that each of us has in the love and grace of Jesus Christ, and in doing so, we will live out the wishes of a dying man who never got to see his Promised Land.

Deuteronomy calls us to look to the past and think of the future as we give of ourselves and our gifts. Like Moses himself, who was thinking of the legacy he would leave to future generations, we are called to think of what gifts we will leave to our children, and of how we will leave our world. As we read Moses' farewell address, we are reminded to bow before a resurrected Jesus, who calls us to love and serve others, rejoicing always. May we live richly into this inheritance that each and every one of us can claim. May it be so, Amen.