

## Deuteronomy 26: 1-2, 5-13a, & 16

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>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.” 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.

<sup>12</sup>When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, <sup>13</sup>then you shall say before the Lord your God: “I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans,

and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; .....

<sup>16</sup>This very day the Lord your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul.

We just finished our Dave Ramsey class here at church, and several families and individuals participated, Patrick and I were part of the group.

During the 13 week long course we met for 2 hours every Thursday evening to watch a video and have discussions. We learned about budgeting, paying off debt, saving money through essentially haggling and bargaining, mutual funds, mortgages, insurance, and giving back. We had worksheets and homework to complete each week. It was a very positive experience, and I think we all learned things about our spending habits and savings patterns. In the beginning of our time together we were all charged with making a budget - where we learned to plan how we would spend our money before we were paid. It was a manual for how to be in control of our income. This process forced us to think about our incomes, controlling them instead of just simply "going with the flow" or being controlled by our money.

We were no longer passive when it came time to discuss the things we needed to do with money. We made decisions about spending ahead of time and challenged ourselves to stick to those budgets. Dave advocates a cash envelope system - so that you have cash for certain things in multiple envelopes, and when the cash is gone - you are done. For instance you might have budgeted \$400 in an envelope for groceries. The money is only spent for groceries. You never spend the money out of the grocery envelope for other budgeted – or non budgeted items.

I know I was not the only one who quickly learned a different approach to grocery shopping. We all began to laugh at how much food we'd had sitting in our pantries that we were now eating because convenience didn't trump an empty envelope. In the end what happened was that we had our money spent before the month even began because we all planned and controlled where it went before it ever hit the bank account. This process of budgeting also meant that we were able to figure out a plan for giving - giving that included our first fruits, the best of what we could share, not what was left over at the end of the month. Our manual advocated giving back - first not last.

The giving line was even a part of our basic budget – so it became a part of our habit as our habit was being formed – or reformed. Giving back was a way of acknowledging that all things come from God and we needed to share in that gift.

Our scripture today is an instruction manual of sorts, for giving thanks. It tells us why we give thanks - because God rescued the Israelites from a life of wandering and slavery. Interestingly - the word for Egypt - Mitzrayim means "a narrow place" in the Hebrew. The verses served as a reminder that God took the Israelites and saved them from a narrow place - and continues to be present in their whole lives including the narrow places.

The text for today also tells us what to use - our first or our best fruits from the harvest - to give back to God what God has given to us first and foremost. Finally this manual in scripture told us who to include, the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows should all be included in the celebration of thanksgiving - as full participants in the life of the community.

The community needed a manual - this text was probably recorded later - many years, centuries even, after the lives of Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca, Jacob & Rachel, Leah, Joseph, and Moses. They didn't have the same exodus experiences of God that the matriarchs and patriarchs of previous generations had experienced first hand - but they did have a rich history that witnessed to those events. By remembering their past they were able to recognize God in their midst in the present. Their lives may have been incredibly different from that of their ancestors, but staying grounded in the truth that God rescued them from bondage is what allowed the Hebrew people to ground their lives in God. God was present in delivering the harvest and in their history. God was present in their lives as individuals and as a community of believers. This was a reminder that same God that delivered the people from the narrow places of Egypt and exile was the God who was also the creator and sustainer of their lives and would lead them through the narrow places in the future.

With thanksgiving right around the corner it is no coincidence that this passage is our focus. We may still experience the idea of harvest today in Iowa, but it seems that these days in many ways we are more removed from the idea of giving thanks for a harvest. Not many people experience harvest in the same ways that we once did.

We tend to focus more on the blessings in our lives, including families and friendships. Yet, in some ways thanksgiving today helps us to focus more on our lives in community than it once did. In the past - what we were thankful for, our harvest, really did come in large part, from the fruits of our own labor. Your family ate what they planted, tended, and harvested. Today what we are thankful for comes from the fruit of our labor through the trading of money for goods. The reality is that we rely more on each other than ever - more on the global community - to make and create our goods, to provide services.

We have so much - we have clean water, food, and medicine. We have shelter in our homes that are built safely. We have a democracy and freedom of speech and religion. We live in a country where we are relatively safe - in comparison with most of the world.

There are so many in the world that are struggling for any or all of these pieces of our lives - and as physically disconnected as we may be from them - because of distance - we are physically connected to them because of the clothes we wear - which they weave and sew. We are connected because of the foods we eat - like chocolate, fruits, vegetables, and the coffee we drink which they often grow and harvest.

We are connected to them because of the light bulbs we use, the computers, the blankets, carpets, and curtains we use. Our harvest comes in on their backs - literally and figuratively. They are the widows and orphans and aliens that this passage speaks of today, they are children of God – made in God's image. This passage is as relevant to our lives today as it was to the lives of the Israelite when it was recorded.

This scripture giving thanks is about more than recognizing our own gifts - it is about connecting to God, grounding ourselves in God's presence in our lives. God surrounds us in love and grace. We all have been brought through our own narrow places. God's grace and love will bring us through the narrow places of the future.

Acknowledging how we are rooted in God's grace and bounty nurtures a spiritual and divine connection and at the same time it nurtures a connection to the community. When we are grounded in God's ways and love, we also recognize how God asks us to also be in right relationship with the rest of God's children.

So as we come together to celebrate let us remember our own bounty and simultaneously heed God's call. May we share our first fruits, not what's left over, with all of those children - the widows, the orphans, and all those in need and may we all bear God's light and love more fully into the world this thanksgiving and every day, Amen.