

## LIKE A WATERED GARDEN

### *Before and After*

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
February 27-28, 2010 ♦ Second Sunday in Lent  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

#### 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, 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. 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." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, 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. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and [God] brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 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. 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.*

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***"So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."***

Deuteronomy 26:10a

Gardeners are busy with excitement and hope this time of year. They are now, even while the ground is frozen and covered in snow pouring over seed catalogues; thinking about the kinds of plants and vegetables they want to grow; plotting and planning when they will get started.

I stopped by my neighborhood Starbucks yesterday morning and ran into Fred Madden and his son. After greeting them, I purchased my usual Venti Awake Tea, double cupped. And after allowing it to steep for a while, I went to put the finishing touches on a fine cup of tea: one packet of *Sweet and Low*, one packet of *Splenda*, and just the right amount of half and half. While I was doing that, I happened to overhear Fred and his son talking about a garden. I wasn't trying to be nosey, but I just happened to over hear them scheming and dreaming about the vegetables they wanted to plant and grow. They were so intense in their conversation that they didn't even know I was standing right behind them. They were so engaged and excited about their garden that I didn't have the nerve to interrupt them.

Gardeners are a unique lot. Perhaps more than most, gardeners live the thrill of transformation. Even in the winter, fallow season they can see and envision what will come if the seeds are planted and watered and weeded and tended with great care. They can already smell the fragrant flowers and imagine the colorful blooms. They can already taste the delicious green beans and tomatoes fresh from the vine. They know that "before and after" is the story of the garden. They are thrilled to put their hands in the dirt and give themselves to that story.

But the transformation gardeners celebrate is not just the seasons of spring planting, summer weeding and tending, fall harvesting and fruitfulness and winter fallowness. Truly, these yearly,

ongoing cycles of transformation are amazing and it is thrill to cycle through these seasons each year.

However, Juli Burnell tells me (and if Master Gardener Juli Burnell tells me, it must be true!) that gardeners, if they are paying attention get to see the cycle of life at work before their very eyes on a daily basis. They get to witness the process of transformation as a daily, recurring phenomenon. Especially in the morning, they rise to see what new wonders there are to behold in the garden.

Well, like a good gardener, our text today calls us to pay attention, to rise with intention and to remember and call to mind that same process of transformation at work in our lives that is at work in the garden – that movement of “before and after” that marks our lives and changes us in ways we never imagined possible and gives us strength and courage for the journey...not only in a macro, big-picture sense, but also in a micro sense...in the day-to-day, ordinary goodness of life.

Now to be clear: not all remembering is like this. Many memories don't need intentional summoning. They are constant companions. Or they seem to track us down and jump out of nowhere to push a picture from our past in our face. The smallest little things can trigger these. A song, a name, an accidental turn of thought – and off you go, it all comes back. Let's call it reflex memory. Some of it is trivial and random; a brain cell will ignite some long forgotten little thing. But most of what I'm calling reflex memory is made of more substantial stuff, people and events that have gotten to you and stuck. There are happy varieties of reflex memory: faces of our loved ones, pleasant times, favorite places. And there are bitter varieties of reflex memory: old disappointments, betrayals, failures, horrors, regrets, deaths and other losses. Whether the happy kind or the bitter kind, these old events and feelings inhabit reflex memory because they have been large in our lives. And until brain function fails us, they'll keep right on flashing their pictures on the walls of our minds.

But the remembering I am talking about today points to a different thing. Not reflex memory, not what naturally haunts you or pleases you from the past, but this other kind of deliberate going back to retrieve what has slipped away --memory searched out, re-taken, chosen, claimed. And it seems to me that those who will not wisely choose what memory to reclaim are likely doomed to the haphazard tyranny of the old pictures, are likely stuck in the old stories of then until now that just keep running like movie reels through our mind and our life.

Our sacred scriptures speak to this. Here and there the Bible gives a bit of guidance on how to assert memory, how to choose from our past what matters most, and having recollected these memories, to let good and decisive and life-giving and hopeful and generous and courageous living flow from them. An example of this is the odd little text we read today from the Book of Deuteronomy. This text is odd because it's not at all literally applicable to us. And it is odd because it's not the kind of material we normally turn to in the Bible. From scripture we draw most often from stories, exhortations, poems, prayers, and prophetic visions. But this text turns out to be directions for an act of worship prescribed for ancient Israelites. It's a page from an out-of-date liturgical manual or book of worship. And yet it still sings.

The way I understand it, out in the wilderness, Moses is instructing people who are about to enter their new land. He's giving them final instructions on any number of things. In our reading today he is telling them how their offerings should be given when they have become “gardeners” in the promise land. He says: When harvest time comes, each of you fill a basket with the first fruits of the garden, bring it to the sanctuary and say to the priest: “This land – this garden -- was God's gift to us.” Then give your basket to the priest to lay it on the altar. Then these are the words you must say: *“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.* What is striking is the reach of the memory being asserted here. People at worship bearing baskets of what they have just this week produced from the garden of their lives are to state the reason for their gift in terms of events that happened long, long ago.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” could mean old Jacob, a primary ancestor from centuries long ago. Jacob's mother Rebekah was ethnically from a group called Arameans;

he himself married two women who were also Arameans. The Arameans were nomadic people. But “a wandering Aramean” may not indicate any specific individual at all since it is the landless condition of a desert wanderer that is foremost. The Hebrew literally denotes “one who is destitute, perishing, homeless.”

But even with that said, you're not finished, says Moses. That is not enough. Go on and tell the rest of the story. Go on to say: *When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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 and [God] brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*” In other words, don't forget that we were slaves, dispossessed even of our lives. We were held down harshly, and in our misery we cried to God – and, what do you know, God heard us and acted for us and set us free, handed us our lives and gave us a place for good living.

One Jewish writer said “It's Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as ‘we,’ not ‘they.’ ‘When we were delivered from Egypt...’ This encourages empathy and responsibility to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt. A good way to teach ethics.” (Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Places*, page 159)

I would think it's a good way to teach or learn a great many things that matter: to locate your origins in old and shared impoverishments, to know you do not finally come from any greatness, that your heritage includes violence, ignorance and enormous need – and to know most of all that you live in the fortunate legacy of gift on gift, grace on grace, deliverance on deliverance, repeated “before's and after's” requiring you to live a life that is grateful to the core, insistently generous, and tenaciously hopeful.

To put it in the negative, to live with a heart that is mostly ungrateful and a spirit that is in fact ungenerous, is indication of a lousy memory. It means that the mind is tyrannized by the reflexive replays of old scripts, old slights, old disappointments, dead-end dreams and appetites, and the lifeless “then's until now's.” But to recollect the long arc of our real story – the enslavement we've been freed from and the gifts God's love has lavished on us – puts our smaller memories in a whole new light. Martin Luther King, Jr. was adamant that when it comes to the work of justice, we must remember that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

And even with all of that being remembered and said, Moses says, you're still not finished. That is still not enough. You've got to go on and tell the whole story...and it is not complete until you put yourself in the story. So, go on to say, “*So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.*” “So now I...” “I.” Here is my gift. Here is my response. Here is my glad worship today because of all this that happened to me long before I was born; because of all this that is still happening to me. I am now naming *that* Story as my story. When you give your gift, says Moses, say it in such a way that you put yourself in the Story. Say, I come from people who had no home. A wandering Aramean was ancestor – my heritage is vulnerability, destitution, homelessness, slavery. And remembering that Story, that Story that celebrates the amazement of “before and after,” I now claim it as my own. As I come to worship, I bring my first fruits to you, O God, in thankfulness and gratefulness, in deep trust and hope that my life with You is truly the ongoing and repeated story of before's and after's.

Did you notice this process of transformation...this story of before and after...at work in the text? If you pay attention to the pronouns you'll see it (I'm grateful to Barbara Battin for pointing this out to me). It starts out “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor, **he** went down...” It is stated in third person. Then it moves to “*When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, **we** cried to the Lord...*” The pronoun shifts to the first person plural, “We.” Then the pronoun shifts again. “*So now **I** bring the first of the fruit of the ground...*” Suddenly, we have the first person singular pronoun, “I.” This story is a celebration of the macro story of transformation: from bondage to freedom, from oppression to liberation, from exile to home. But this text won't let us leave it there. It insists that it must also be a personal testimony, a remembering and a celebration of the big and little day to day transformations that mark our lives.

It's a mighty fine worship instruction Moses gave for what to remember when you're holding the basket of your life's produce in your hands, gleaned from the garden of your life. You remember that your voice has been a slave's voice crying out, and that God has been faithful to slaves like you when they cried out. It's the kind of recollection that helps you understand this: your life has nothing to do with entitlement; your life has everything to do with amazement – the wonder of transformation marked by countless "befores and afters."

Well, leave it to Carrie Newcomer to say it beautifully:

We live our lives from then until now,  
By the mercies received and the marks on our brow  
To my heart I'll collect what the four winds will scatter  
And frame my life by before and after

(from Carrie Newcomer's CD *Before and After*)

Friends, let us delight in our garden of amazement – the wonders of before and afters, and give thanks.

And may Janice Kemp's prayer on the front of your bulletin be our prayer:

"Source of life, nurture in this apparently lifeless place astonishing new life like the winter aconites around my mailbox."

Amen.