

## Wayfarers All

It is certainly not the usual thing for a preacher who wants to observe the traditional liturgical seasons to pick the Old Testament lectionary reading for the basis of his or her sermon on the first Sunday in Lent. I'm willing to bet that you'd be hard pressed to drop into any church this morning where Lent is being observed and not hear a sermon on the Temptations of Jesus in the desert. But as most of you have figured out by now, I quite often deviate from normally expected patterns. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," is a phrase that I have heard applied to myself from time to time. Indeed, it even took me a long time this week to figure out just what it was that compelled me to focus on this passage from Deuteronomy this week, what on earth it was that I thought I was going to say. But the words of the fifth book of the Pentateuch kept stirring in me, leading my thoughts backwards and forwards, into the mists of memory and towards glimpses of a yet-to-be-revealed future. And so, I want to share some of those musings with you this morning. I invite you to travel with me as I consider several journeys – the journey of my family and myself to this place, the journey of the Children of Israel into and out of Egypt and to the Promised Land, the journey of Jesus toward the Cross and the Lenten journey of all Christians from repentance to renewal. As we consider these journeys, where we have gone, I hope they will inspire us to also look ahead, into what's next for us as God's people in this place. Perhaps it's the early coming of spring or perhaps it's anticipation of the events of the next few weeks or the peculiar juxtaposition of events in the last few weeks that makes me feel that the Hand of God is upon us, but I can't help but be tremendously excited about the future of Good Shepherd Baptist Church today. I hope you will share my excitement.

"A wandering Aramean was my father." Well, not literally. My heritage on my dad's side of the family is pretty solidly French with some Englishmen and, we think, some Blackfoot and Cherokee mixed in as well. "Wandering" suits us pretty well, though, from the happy wanderers who came from France into Canada and down the Mississippi to become the first settlers in what would become the state of Missouri down to my dad, who moved his wife and growing family from St. Louis to California and back and then to Florida, England and New York before returning to Missouri. After I left home, Dad continued to wander, first to Arizona, then Pennsylvania and Ohio before settling in Iowa. I would say "finally settling" – he turned 75 yesterday after all – but with Dad you never can be sure. I've carried on his peripatetic ways, taking my wife and kids to Texas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, back to Texas, back to Kentucky, Bothell and Indiana before coming to Lynnwood. I'd like to think we've "finally settled," too. As many of you know, we're looking for a house to buy in Lynnwood and one of our search criteria is that it be a house we're happy to live in for the next 30 years. Unless I get some pretty clear direction from God otherwise, we're here to stay.

But the statement that "my father was a wandering Aramean" resonates with me for other reasons, too. These verses in Deuteronomy are often thought to be one of the ancient creeds of Israel. The affirmation that God has chosen and blessed the descendants of Jacob, bringing them from poverty and rootlessness through the trial of captivity to cruel masters and to the relative security of a home of their own with enough for all and to be shared, is an affirmation that may also be made by the spiritual descendants of Jacob. As Paul wrote to the Romans, those of us who are not descended from Israel but who claim Christ Jesus as Lord are as wild olive shoots grafted in to the ancient tree. We are not to boast over the natural branches but we share their inheritance of God's promise. In the flesh, we may be sons and daughters of Norway, Sweden, France, Bohemia, Belgium, Ukraine, Cameroon or Korea but in the Spirit, we are children of

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Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, for we have joined with them in worshipping their God and our God. As Jane Strohl of Luther Seminary in St. Paul writes, “all of us gathered here today, even though we can’t trace our blood lines back to the Israelite slaves in Egypt, have made this story our own. It’s how we have come to know ourselves, as people in bondage and afflicted, as people beloved and redeemed, as people with reason to rejoice and be thankful. This particular history becomes paradigmatic for all history and embraces every human life. Suddenly our kinship knows no bounds. By this confession we honor the Lord our God and make ourselves known to one another. It is a gift, this experience of the power of God that allows us to take these words on our lips as our own.”

There is something else here, I think, that causes that phrase, “A wandering Aramean was my father,” to resonate deeply within me and, I suspect, with most of us. It is the rare human being that hasn’t, at some point in their life, felt that odd sense of dislocation, of being not entirely at home where they are and the need to seek out the true home. We are wayfarers, all. When I was a boy, one of my favorite books, read over and over again, was The Wind in the Willows, the 1908 children’s classic by Kenneth Grahame. I was lucky enough to have an edition with illustrations by E.H. Shepard, who more famously illustrated Winnie the Pooh. One chapter, entitled “Wayfarers All,” tells the tale of one of the main characters, the Water Rat, suddenly seized by wanderlust, the inexplicable desire to go a-journeying, far from his beloved home. He is interrupted in this desire by his best friend, the Mole, and, in this children’s novel of the virtues of home and friends, quickly settles back into his happy routine. But we humans are wider ranging than Grahame’s little stay-at-home creatures and something calls to us that we ignore with less ease. “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee...” wrote Augustine to God in his Confessions. Our lives mirror the experience of the wandering Aramean and his descendants but our journey to the Promised Land takes up all our lives, reaching its fulfillment only in its conclusion.

This image of the journey is one that is often associated with the season of Lent. The fast of Lent lasts for forty days, in imitation of the fast of Jesus in the wilderness. Those forty days of wilderness fasting call to mind the forty year wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness, the journey that eventually led them to the Promised Land. We also mark the forty days of Lent as preparation for the celebration of Easter and we speak of Jesus’ journey to the Cross during this time. As we think of Jesus turning his gaze toward Jerusalem and what awaited him there, we compare our lives with his life, our frequent infidelity to God with his steadfastness. We take the time in Lent to repent but the meaning of the season is not in dust and ashes but in the renewal we find as we cast off the vain things that have charmed us most and rededicate ourselves to walking in the way of Jesus, seeking first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. We move from “a wandering Aramean was my father” to “the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction... The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” In our Lenten journey, we are called to remember what God has done for us, how God has raised us up on eagle’s wings and held us in the palm of her loving hand. The journey of Lent leads us from confession of our faults to confession of the Eternal One’s provision for us.

Nor is gratitude the end of our journey. In Deuteronomy, God called the Chosen People to turn their thankfulness into action. “You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground,

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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... 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.” Out of our gratitude, we are called to share from the best we have with those who are at risk in our society, with the ones Deuteronomy calls the aliens or the strangers, the ones who are not like us.

As I read over the Scriptures for this morning over the course of the week, the passage from Deuteronomy and the Psalm that is the basis for our Call to Worship and the hymn “On Eagle’s Wings,” I thought of how very much we at Good Shepherd Baptist have to be thankful for. Individually and in our family units, we have certainly been blessed with a high standard of living in comparison to the rest of the world. While none of us are untouched by sorrow, we have loving families and friends, safe and warm places to live, enough to satisfy all our needs and many of our wants. As a community, we have been blessed together with a beautiful place to meet and worship, with a Spirit of love and togetherness, with the fulfilled vision of Shepherd’s Garden. We have much to be thankful for and it is right and fitting that we raise our thanks to God and it is right that we share of what we have with those outside our community of faith.

As I think of Good Shepherd and our journey together, it seems to me that we have a pretty good track record of sharing with those who are quite different in some ways from ourselves. For nearly twenty years now, by my reckoning, this congregation has shared the land provided for us with our neighbors in Community Gardens. As I wrote this on Saturday, I saw a steady stream of gardeners coming to take advantage of the fine weather to prepare their plots, either for the upcoming growing season or to shift their plants to the gardens’ new location. I hope you know what a gift this is considered by those who garden with us. Whenever I’ve had a chance to chat with our gardeners, they nearly always express their deep appreciation that this congregation has made a place for them.

For even longer, Good Shepherd has shared this building with groups of all sorts who are looking for a home. I’ll speak in a minute about the congregations of other Christians who’ve met here but I also want to consider the non-church groups. By keeping our rental rates fair but low, we been able to serve weight-loss groups, garden clubs, a jazz band and recovery groups. It’s easy to think that this arrangement only connects with our ministry in the revenue it provides us to help keep our doors open. But I assure you, that’s not how many of the members of these groups see it. To them, Good Shepherd is “their church” in a way that might surprise you. Members of these groups stop off in my office to share their joys and concerns just as you do. I’ve performed funerals for their families and we’ll host a wedding for one of the group leaders this summer. Unseen by most here, they fill our food bank barrel, or drop off checks with me to go to our benevolence fund or claim gift tags off the giving tree to help us fulfill the wish lists of families at Christmas. Some of them have a walk with Jesus that we would not recognize, if indeed they would claim such a thing. They are “not like us.” But by sharing this space with them, our gratitude expressed in sharing has allowed more gratitude and more giving. Good News, indeed!

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Your generosity in the use of this building has had more obvious impact on other lives. I think it's safe to say that the use of our Fellowship Hall as a sleeping area for the homeless, first with Interfaith Hospitality Network of Seattle and now with the Cold Weather Shelter Network of South Snohomish County has quite literally saved lives. I know of men who have slept in our space who have gone on to secure safe, affordable places to live and of families who were here with INHS who have now returned to "mainstream" living, with jobs for the parents and regular school for the children and a real home. When we add in the contributions to the Food Bank made through this church and the regular disbursements from the Benevolence Fund that help our neighbors in need, plus our regular offerings to denominational ministries and help for those in crisis around the world, it is clear that this church takes seriously the call to show our gratitude to God in generosity to others. We have welcomed the stranger to share in our bounty.

But we are still on our journey together. We still have miles to go and promises to keep. As we start the phase of our journey called Lent 2010, I cannot help but consider how we can extend our welcome to even more people, how we can reach out to those who are not a part of our community here, especially those who are strangers or aliens in the community of Lynnwood. We have a wonderful opportunity to be good neighbors and friends to the men and women who will begin moving in to Shepherd's Garden next week. I want to thank those of you who have been working with me to prepare a welcome packet for our new neighbors, a packet that will include information about our church as well as shops and services and other places of worship in our area. But our welcome can't end with that packet. We'll have someone on the inside in the person of Lannon Thomas who can help us get to know our new neighbors as individuals. Some of them may need rides to the doctor or might like to be invited along on trips to the theatre. Some of them may want to worship with us or join us as we minister to others. I encourage you to consider how you might become a friend to one or more of our new neighbors and share with them from the bounty God has given.

Now that Shepherd's Garden is complete and the future of our Community Gardens is mapped out, it's time for us to turn to other aspects of the plan developed in 2003. An arboretum and wedding garden were envisioned during that planning process and we went so far as to have a landscape architect draw up plans. Because Shepherd's Garden is configured differently than we first thought, those plans will have to be redrafted. We will also have to raise money and volunteer power to effect the landscaping necessary to create the space that has been imagined. If that seems like a tall order, let me remind you that this little congregation has just seen the completion of a \$10 million project that God gave you the vision for. With God, all things are possible. And I hope you are still as excited as I am by the prospect of a space that invites our neighbors to come and meditate or celebrate on the property God has provided for us. How many more people may come to view us as "their church" just as those in our rental groups do now!

Discussions of the arboretum project have always included outreach to the horticulture department at Edmonds Community College. That institution and its students are often on my heart. I've had several conversations with Rev. Dr. Judy Gay during my time here about what a wonderful mission field the college is for Good Shepherd. I've also had some conversations in recent weeks with colleagues from Evergreen Association about the influx our area is seeing in young Christians from overseas. We've been blessed with the fellowship of Fali Njingzim and

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Ria Esmame and Sun Woo Nam. I am praying for guidance in how we can not only help them feel at home among us but also how we can reach out to their classmates, welcoming the strangers among us as God would have us do. I've been talking with Ryan Calkins about the spiritual needs of young adults and heard from Meggie Lavelle that she also has things she'd like to share in this regard. Now that we've made a place among us for elderly strangers, is it possible that we can welcome new twenty and thirtysomethings, too? I hope so!

In fact, I hope we can work our way down the age scale to working with neighbors who are younger yet. Our sister church, First Baptist Mountlake Terrace, is now in the second year of a wonderful partnership with their local elementary schools. Called "Wings to Reading," this program assists children who are behind in mastering reading skills, many of them from low-income families or families where English is not the first language. They have received recognition from the Superintendent of the Edmonds School District, principals and teachers are unanimously positive about the program and they have more applicants than they can serve. Funding has come from Wal-Mart and major textbook publishers. Not only are our brothers and sisters at First Baptist Mountlake Terrace teaching kids to read, they are quietly spreading the love of God, making the church a place that children and their families associate with help and good things, giving out of the bounty God has given them to bless the strangers who live among them. Diane Plourde, wife of Pastor Dennis Plourde, heads the program and could always use volunteers. Are there those among us who would go and learn from Diane so that we might consider such a program with Lynndale Elementary?

I mentioned earlier that I would have more to say about the other Christian congregations that share our space. Most of you know that the Han Bit Korean Methodist Church worships in our space on Sunday afternoons and early Saturday mornings. This afternoon, I will be extending your official welcome to Masihi Milap Foursquare Church, a gathering of evangelical Christians from the Indian subcontinent who worship in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. We've previously hosted other congregations from Korea and places around the world. During my time here, so far, I think we could characterize these other Christian groups as "guest congregations." But what if we were to seek a different kind of relationship with them? What if they became "partner congregations?" I've spoken with Pastor Seung Ho Chun of Han Bit Methodist about this and we are both excited by the possibilities. We would very much like to bring our congregations together for a fellowship meal and communion on Easter Sunday and I will be presenting our Deacons with a plan to accommodate this idea in upcoming days. Please let the deacons know what you think of such an idea. I believe the blessings we could receive and share in such a relationship could be rich indeed.

As I approach the milestone of five years in your service, I'm so grateful to God for bringing me to this place. I walked the quiet property of Shepherd's Garden this week, with the construction workers gone and the residents not yet moved in, and I looked back over what God has done in our years together so far. But just as we are only beginning our Lenten journey today, so I believe we are just beginning our journey together on the path God has for us as Good Shepherd Baptist Church. We have come together as wayfarers and God is sending more wayfarers to join us, strangers to this place and to our customs and perhaps to our language. But we are called by the word of God to the Children of Israel to share from the bounty God has given us with the strangers in our midst. We are called by Jesus to love those neighbors that we might not

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recognize as neighbors because they are so different, the Samaritans to our Judeans. We are reminded by Paul that just as we have been grafted into the tree of Israel, so now there are no Jews or Greeks, barbarians or Scythians, free or slave, male or female, but all are one in Christ. We are wayfarers all and we are called to walk in the way of Jesus. Thanks be to God.