

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
February 21, 2010, First Sunday in Lent
“A Shovel-Width Path”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

For centuries now, the Jewish calendar has been marked by holy days and festivals designed to make sure that every man, woman, and child knows the story of their faith. The three principal ones are the celebration of Passover, in which people remember the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and the two harvest festivals, the springtime festival of weeks and the autumn festival of booths. Today’s reading from Deuteronomy 26 is about the first harvest festival, the festival of weeks. Through the voice of Moses, the people are commanded to do a three-part ritual every spring time. When the crops are beginning to bear fruit, they are to gather up some of the initial produce, the “first fruits”, place them in a basket and bring them to the temple in Jerusalem. Then, as they hand the offering to the priests, they are to re-tell the story of their faith – how their ancestors had no lasting home and lived as strangers in a strange land until the Lord rescued them and brought them into a land of milk and honey. Third, they are to bow down to God, acknowledging God as the provider of all good gifts in this life, and thereby commit themselves to use the fruits of the harvest in ways that are pleasing to the Lord. As a sign of that commitment, a meal is shared with the people and priests, the immigrants, widows, and orphans in their midst, to celebrate the bountiful goodness of God.

The beauty of this ritual is that it captures the three crucial parts of a living faith. First, you prioritize your life around what you believe. At the moment when a harvest is first gathered in, or a paycheck has just been cashed, or a day full of potential has just dawned, you intentionally designate a part of that bounty to be used for the glory of the Lord. Second, you tell again the story of how God has given you and those around you countless blessings – of life and breath, shelter and food, family and friends, mind and spirit. Third, you share what you have with others, the alien and stranger, the needy and the lonely, so that the Lord’s bounty might be enjoyed by all. Prioritize – proclaim – provide for all: of such virtues has our faith been established from of old.

There’s a lot more to be said about this passage from Deuteronomy, but I’m going to pause and talk for a moment about a subject you really want to hear about – snow! The recent snowstorm has left us with many powerful images – of yards and roofs buried beneath mounds of snow, trees bent over by the snow’s weight, and the icy cubicles carved out along the side of the road in which people park their cars overnight and protect these spots with chairs, crates and tables during the day (and heaven help anyone who poaches someone’s parking spot!). We quickly learned who in our neighborhood owned a snow blower, lusting after those machines the way we used to lust after Cadillacs and Mercedes Benzes. “Bob has a nice Honda four-stroke with an electric starter, but I’m hoping to save up enough to buy a Toro PowerMax with the Briggs & Stratton motor and self-propelled augur.”

In the early days of the snowstorm, to get anywhere meant that you had to walk in the streets. Eventually, a variety of paths were carved into the snow. Some of them were

made simply by shoes and boots packing down the snow. Most of them were single-lane affairs about the width of a shovel. A shovel-width path meant that you had to look ahead to see who was coming toward you, because invariably one of you had to step in the snowdrift to allow the other one to pass. A shovel-width path or a road plowed just wide enough for a single car to pass meant that we had to make lots of decisions about who has right-of-way: making room for the person older than you, or the person carrying shopping bags or walking with kids, determining which car was closest to the nearest wide patch in the snow-covered road. These narrow paths through the snow meant that we were brought face-to-face with lots of people we might never have seen or greeted or made eye contact with under normal circumstances. There's a faith lesson to be learned in all this.

A wide sidewalk totally cleared of snow means you can pass people without making a comment or connection. A wide road means you can drive past one another without a single thought about who is behind the wheel in the other car. Wide paths in life allow us to happily keep the world separated into categories of "us" and "them," young and old, black and white, rich and poor, whatever. This is not a new development; it has been a part of human history from time immemorial. Given the current divide between Republicans and Democrats, I was amused to read a quote from G.K. Chesterton written back in 1924 in which he said, "The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected." (quoted in *Illustrated London News*, 4-19-1924)

This whole topic of narrow paths in the snow made me remember Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount, when he said: *Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.* As a kid and even as an adult, when I've tried to picture that narrow way, I've thought of it as something quite difficult, as if I were trying to walk on a tight-rope or a balance-beam. I pictured it as something hard to do, a pathway unnaturally thin and perilous, where I'd inevitably lose my balance – so why bother trying to stay on the path? None of us are perfect, yet it seemed here was Jesus trying to force us to walk this difficult and narrow path.

But the snowstorm caused me to imagine Jesus' words in a different way. What if Jesus is asking us to remember the shovel-width paths of the snowstorm – how they prevented us from walking indifferently through life, how we made eye contact with strangers, stepped to one side to allow others to pass, offered a helping hand to those who needed one – simple things like that? What if Jesus is asking us to remember the elderly who live on our block and in our cities, to be willing to shovel more than just our own personal space or push out someone else's car stuck on an icy patch? What if Jesus is saying that we will always be inclined to build wide paths in life – wide roads, wide sidewalks, wide national borders, wide aisles between political parties – things to keep us unnaturally apart from one another. Yet Jesus calls us to choose a narrow path, where we bump into one another, see one another, care for one another, and live together as God's people working in God's fields for the glory of God.

Now Jesus' warning is still just as potent and true: *The wide road is easy that leads to destruction; many will take it.* Many will say "I cannot be bothered by that person. I cannot respond to their needs. I have right-of-way here. My needs take precedence. I can only take care of my section of road; I will only shovel my little bit of sidewalk." But soon we discover that such decisions lead us to be stuck by the side of the road, somewhere on the margins of the path of life, in a place of destruction, isolation, and disappointment.

Which brings us back to the wisdom of Deuteronomy and the offering of one's first fruits. Quite often the language about "first fruits" is associated with Christian stewardship, about our support of the church in tithes and offerings. Some people are tempted to dismiss the conversation by saying "I don't want to talk about money when I go to church" or "I'm not a farmer or gardener, so I don't see how this Old Testament scripture applies to my life today." But think back to what was being commanded of the people of God. They were told to prioritize their lives through the act of setting apart the first fruits of their harvest – the first moments of each day, the first rewards from their labors, the first words they speak to others, the first checks they write to others, the first things at the top of their "To Do" lists – and remember that all that they have comes from God and should be used to the glory of God. Second, they were to re-tell the story of what they believe and why: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor*; what is your story? Do you believe that there is a good God over you, a loving Savior beside you, and a forgiving, empowering Holy Spirit within you? Can you proclaim that story if someone asked you? Can you put it in your own words? Third, we are to walk the narrow path, seeing those approaching us, caring for those struggling beside us – and to do so once the snow has melted and we can freely choose the roads we will travel and where on the sidewalks we will walk.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We walk the next forty days toward the place where a cross will hold a King but a grave will fail to keep him captive. This season has much in common with our Jewish brethren's festivals. Remember the words of Deuteronomy: Prioritize – proclaim – provide; for the Lord is good and God's bounty is for all. Remember the Sermon on the Mount: the path of Christ is always a narrow path, not because it is hard there to keep our balance, but because there will always be numerous options for avoiding it if we so choose. Sometimes snowstorms are a blessing, because their shovel-width paths take away the other choices for a time. May we learn from these things and go forth to love and serve the Lord.

AMEN