

“Get a Basket”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
BASED ON THE THEME, “STRANGE PATHS”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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Deuteronomy 26: 1-11 [NRSV]

¹ 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, ² 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. ³ 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.”

⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, ⁵ 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. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷ we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ 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; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

I never realized or thought about how many baskets there are until I started thinking about this sermon. There are laundry baskets, Easter baskets, shopping baskets, picnic baskets, baby baskets, bread baskets, baskets for balls! Basket- ball? Bushel baskets? The reason I chose the topic “Get a Basket” is that this passage tells how the Israelites would bring their offering to God in a basket. I want to talk a little about those baskets, and then

get you to think about what you might bring God in your basket. So, mentally and spiritually I want you to get a basket during this sermon and think about what goes in it.

The Israelites were about to enter into the Promised Land. After generations of living as slaves in Egypt, the people had escaped and were about to enter into a land they felt God was giving them. This holy moment, this God – moment, similar to the ones we

are sharing during our ministry and mission moments during Lent- they paused to celebrate, remember, and honor God for bringing them so far.

So God is giving them instructions on how to do this as a people. An individual can celebrate, remember, and honor God without instructions, but it seems that doing these things as a group requires a little instruction, a little coaching. So God says, when you get into the Promised Land and get settled get a basket. Then, take some of the first fruit you harvest, which by the way comes from God, and because it comes from the land God has given you, and go to the place where you worship God. There, you can put the basket on the altar and remember.

In fact, God says, remember and repeat out loud your history: My father and mother were wandering foreigners, who lived as aliens in Egypt. The powerful rulers of the land made slaves of us and we cried out to you O God and you saw and heard our pain. You brought us out of Egypt here and now I have brought this stuff to you to celebrate.

So there is the pattern: make honoring God a priority in your life, remember all that God has done so you know why, and then celebrate!

So I have suggested that Lent, and faith, and following Jesus are all strange paths to glory. How do we take this pattern and make it relevant for our lives today? How do we honor God? How do we remember what God has done and how do we celebrate? First let me

suggest why these are strange elements in our culture today.

First, to honor God you have to go up against everything in our culture. Our culture honors everything and anything as god, but it does not have much interest in a real God. Our culture tempts us to spend our lives honoring ourselves. It tempts us to honor Tiger Woods or Rush Limbaugh or you name the movie star, the sports figure, or the media creation that you are tempted to honor. By honor I mean you have placed that persons words, actions, abilities or thoughts at the center of your life. Oh, I don't do that preacher! I'm a good Christian and I only honor God, you say! Oh, please. You can't live in this culture and not be tempted to honor someone or many someone's ahead of the real, living, Creator God. But that is what Lent is for. That is what faith is about. That is what Christianity calls us to do – calls us to turn away from worshiping at false altars and honoring false gods and choose to honor the one God who may not agree with us politically, look good on a movie screen or be able to hit a one-iron without hooking it. You want to talk about a strange path to glory? Try turning away from things like Facebook, Fox News, American Idol, the New York Stock Exchange results, or whatever else you and I spend our time to stay busy, anesthetize ourselves or ignore the pain inside us and all around us. The challenge of Lent is to spend some time reflecting on who and what we are really honoring in our lives.

This requires us to take some time to remember. Now, in our current culture everything is designed to make us forget. We not only forget about God, we rewrite our personal, national, geological and religious histories to fit the ways we want to honor our false gods. This passage in Deuteronomy was a way to force people to recognize all the ways God had rescued their sorry “patooties” in the past and how dependent they were upon God in reality and how God does act in and through history to change reality. Now tell me that doesn’t sound like a strange path to follow. To admit we aren’t all – powerful, or our particular heroes aren’t the true be –all and end-all for all people of all times is to admit what most people won’t. It is a strange path and it doesn’t sound nearly as glorious as knowing we are – or at least believing we are – on the right side politically, socially, economically, and therefore that means we are on the right side spiritually. The challenge of God is to set aside all others and have no other gods to honor more than we honor God, the one real God that we don’t invent on our own.

The third challenge in this is then to celebrate and again our culture is ready, willing, and able to celebrate anything but God. We will celebrate the Super Bowl, Olympic Gold Medalists, Mardi Gras, Fourth of July, Oscar-winning movies, and the latest app for our phones, but God? That is too strange! Now, don’t get me wrong, it isn’t that it is wrong to celebrate these other things, all I’m asking for is a little perspective. If all those other things are

worth the kind of effort, attention, and money that we put into them, where should celebrating God be? Heck, I was in the Arena last night with about 40,000 people listening to a rock concert and there was a powerful lot of celebrating going on there but I don’t think any of it had much to do with God. There were people there who had travelled from two states away or more and had spent hundreds of dollars for a few hours of celebrating. I would think a real celebration of God would put the Super Bowl to shame if we had it in proper perspective.

Can’t you just see that? “Folks, this is John Madden at the Universe Bowl for God. There are 200,000 in the stands cheering their heads off. The Neilson ratings assure us there are billions around the planet watching and maybe even a few E.T.s tuning in from a galaxy far, far away. Pretty soon God will appear and you should hear the crowd roar when God shows up. Boom! It will knock your socks off when that big guy hits the stage.” I’ve always thought about the question someone asked once, why is it that we don’t turn out by the tens, if not hundreds of thousands for God like we do for football games? Why don’t we cheer and roar for God the way we do for football games and why aren’t we as pleased when the preacher goes over time as we are when a game goes into overtime? I would add, isn’t it interesting we have a push to sell season tickets to the Jaguars to keep them from moving away but can you imagine

anyone doing such a push to turn out people to church to celebrate God?

Now I know maybe celebrating God would be more fun if we took a few cues from the football team, and I will grant you some churches are doing a pretty good imitation of being at a rock concert if not a football game and maybe it is a little bit of both. But, really... is all that necessary to celebrate God? I'll grant you it is a strange path to follow if you choose to celebrate what God is doing in your life, but it seems to me that that is exactly what Lent invites us to do. It invites us to think about what we spend our lives celebrating and make sure we are celebrating God as genuinely and as fully and as meaningfully as we do these other things.

So I am not here to rain on your parade, be the wet blanket at your party, or otherwise dampen your excitement. In fact I want to invite you to consider this strange path to glory as a way to bring greater blessing, meaning, and purpose to your life. I am inviting you to consider an alternative path and that has eternal benefit. I am inviting you to get a basket and put yourself in it.

I think God wants us to honor, remember, and celebrate God by giving our whole selves as best we can. Let's be honest. None of us has this down completely and none of us are likely to have it down perfectly. But this is a season to ask ourselves questions, to seek a new path, to find better answers. We were at Jacksonville University Thursday for their weekly lunch and spiritual chat. One of the students commented on how busy all the students

were and how hard it is to take time for God. I'm inviting you to put your time in the basket for God. I'm inviting you to put your wallet and your calendar in the basket. I'm inviting you to put your heart in the basket – with all its hurts, fears, sicknesses, and yes add as much gratitude as you can.

Think of this Lenten season as a time to get a basket, and put your whole life in it and go before God and set it at the altar. Like those ancient Israelites put your first fruits in the basket and remember all the ways God has been with you and helped you and saved you. Then celebrate it! Lent has traditionally been a time to think of as depriving ourselves of something, of giving up something, and therefore dark and somber. I invite you to get a basket, fill it up and go party with God. How's that sound for a different approach to Lent? AMEN.