

**John F. Carter**  
**February 21, 2010**

**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**Lent 1**

## **A WANDERING ARAMEAN**

### **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 he 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."*

Today, I want to explore with you some remarkable lines in today's reading from Deuteronomy. It is the part that begins with "*A wandering Aramean*" and ends with "*that you, O Lord, have given me*". First, let's look at the historical context of Deuteronomy. It is the last of the five books of the Torah, The Law. The English name for it means "the second law", being second only to the first Law, the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The book was probably written sometime during the seventh century BCE. That does not mean someone just made it up at that time. Rather, priests and scholars took a long-standing but evolving oral tradition, conveyed it in writing, and conferred upon it some of the social and cultural realities of those times (*sitz-im-leben*).

Moses is presented as the narrator. The setting is outside of the Promised Land, in the plains of Moab, on or near Mt. Ebo. Moses is at the end of his life, just as the people of Israel are at the end of their long journey from slavery in Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. As he approaches his death, he looks across the Jordan to the Promised Land. Moses will not get there. Young Joshua will be his heir in the military conflicts to come. For a man who is at death's door, Moses is not short of ideas to communicate. There are 34 chapters in the Book of Deuteronomy. Nevertheless, his alleged final words contain a recitation of *the central faith of Israel*.

*"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."*

Moses is telling the gathered assembly what to do once they have entered and "possessed" the Promised

Land. What follows is a liturgical action as well as a creedal formula, not unlike the Christian Creeds. The people are to take the first fruits (*not the second or third fruits*) and put them in a basket and go to the place that the Lord will choose as a dwelling place for his name.

In other words, bring an offering, a thanksgiving sacrifice to a holy place (temple, church, tabernacle), seek out the priest, and give to him (or her) the basket of first fruits. The priest then sets the basket down on the altar and invites a response from the congregation. This should sound quite familiar. It is basically what we do at the Offertory in our worship. Alms basins replace the basket.

*“All things come of Thee o Lord, and of thine own have we given Thee.”*

What comes next is a recitation of faith as strong and ritualistic as Christian creeds and Eucharistic prayers. It combines the *memory* of saving acts with prayers of *thanksgiving*. Recalling the long journey of the Hebrews, the creedal formula begins ...

*“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.”*

The “wandering Aramean” most likely refers to the patriarch, Jacob. What the Hebrew congregation would recollect is that Jacob and his family were driven by famine to the land of Egypt, where Joseph, his son, was more or less running the country for the Pharaoh. The suffering and adversity of the famine led to opportunity and blessing.

What does “wandering,” mean to you?

To be a wanderer is to be on the move, with or without purpose. One could be on a quest or simply be a vagrant. There is a freedom in wandering, just as there may be a

sense of something profoundly missing. Looking but not seeing. Moving but not progressing.

“Wandering” also suggests being nomadic, as the Hebrew people were before they settled in Canaan. They were not agricultural until they possessed the land they believed God had promised to them.

When have you been a wanderer? You do not have to be traveling to be wandering in a spiritual wilderness. When has a wandering mind led you to something astonishing and joyful?

Jacob and his family were few in number when they first came to Egypt and lived there as aliens. Over time, they became a great nation, mighty and populous. Their great number was the fulfillment of an earlier improbable promise made by God to Abraham to make a great nation of his descendants, as numerous as the stars in the clear, desert night sky.

As sometimes happens with great blessing, an equally momentous crisis develops. The great numbers of the Hebrew people threaten the leaders of Egypt. This is not unusual. Throughout history, our own country has experienced the threat and turbulence of new waves of immigrants.

*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.*

Over time, perhaps several hundred years, the status of the Hebrew people in Egypt changed dramatically from useful aliens to oppressed slaves. They seemed a threat to their host nation even as they became a substantial economic resource. They were treated harshly.

What is like to move from a favored immigrant status to alien outcast? The Hebrews call out to God in their distress. Then a remarkable thing happens. God hears their cries and sees their afflictions. To be really heard and truly seen is an experience of dawning beauty and emancipation. When have you protested about something outrageous, an injustice to yourself, a loved one or about a group of disenfranchised people, and *not* been heard? When have you *been* heard? To be heard and seen is to be unbound from whatever shackles make one less than human in the eyes of others and themselves. The beginning of liberation is to be known as God's creatures, loved and equal with others.

*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,*

After the recognition of their suffering comes the intervention of a divine advocate. The Lord brings them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. An outstretched arm is a powerful image. Think of the hand of God reaching toward Adam in Michelangelo's famous painting. Think of the arm and hand of a policeman (in Hawaii) saving someone who is attempting to jump off a cliff, and the hand of his fellow officer reaching out to save them both as the rescuer and the would-be suicide slip towards the abyss.

"I once was lost but now am found,"

In this ritual of gratitude, Moses is instructing the people to recall how blessed they are and to give thanks to God. It is what we do in the Eucharist as well. We give thanks to God for getting us this far ("tis grace has brought me safe thus far") and for all the frequently unacknowledged blessings we have in our lives. In the case of the Hebrews, what they recall and give thanks for is God delivering them as a *nation*. In the Eucharist, when we remember that,

“On the night before he died for us”, we give thanks for God’s love manifested in Jesus and for spiritual deliverance from sin and death. We tend to think of this deliverance more in personal terms than in communal or corporate ones.

*“And he 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.”*

Here is the arrival back home after hundreds of years. After Jacob’s family’s long sojourn in Egypt, after deliverance from slavery, and after years of wandering in the desert...finally home, to a land flowing with milk and honey. That is to say, to a prosperous place.

Tragically, 3000 years after Joshua went into this land to conquer its several tribes, the land is still the center of great anguish, pain, terror and oppression. Abraham is the father of Isaac *and* Ishmael; God is God of both Israel and Islam, yet enmity and fratricide continue. Today’s passage with its ritualized remembrance of God’s special care for the Hebrew people is most inspiring when understood to represent God’s love for *all* people and God’s desire for compassionate deliverance of all those who are oppressed in any way.

The last part of today’s lesson from Deuteronomy presents an archetype of grateful worship for *all* nations or peoples. Moses teaches that the basket full of the first fruits should be brought before God in the holy place and that the one making the offering should bow down before God, a humble expression of thanksgiving. Indeed, this ritual feels much like the way Americans remember and celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving.

*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.*

Keep in mind that the whole “Wandering Aramean” passage is catechetical, intended to be taught and handed down from one generation to the next, each generation learning anew who they are, from whence they come and the nature of God. So this final point is very important. Since priests do not grow their own food and because aliens who reside in the land of Israel have no land to cultivate, the God of Moses tells the people of Israel that *all* shall celebrate the bounty together; wanderers, aliens, priests, you and me, everyone. This tree of shared food and gratitude has very deep roots.

It is the ancient foundation of hospitality for inviting everyone who comes to worship here at St. John’s to the Eucharistic feast. Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey, however much you have wandered, you are welcome. You are home. Can you imagine Jesus withholding real or spiritual food to anyone who is hungry for either? The “milk and honey” we will share today are the bread and the wine. The elements of communion may differ but it is the same healing, liberating God, and the same hungry human heart, 3000 years ago and right now.