

The Connection between Story and Offering

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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When we bring our offerings in a “basket,” handing them—as Deuteronomy 26 says, to the “priest” (that would be me)—and place them before the altar (on the Lord’s Table), why exactly are we doing that? You could say that we are obeying a commandment. You could say that we are acknowledging God as the source of blessings. You could say that we are sharing as members of this body in the work of the church. All true enough.

But Deuteronomy suggests another way of looking at what we are doing. “When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of Yahweh your God, you shall tell this story.” You explain the offering by telling a story. It is an old, old story—some scholars would say that it is one of the most ancient kernels in the Hebrew Scriptures, preserved as a creed. The story is to be recited, not just by the first generation that enters the land, but by every generation after that. Repeating that story is the best way of remembering who God is and why we bring the offering.

Here is how the story goes: “A wandering Aramean was my father.” What? My father, my ancestor Jacob, was once just a man from Aram, Syria, who had no real home. He was a wanderer. The Hebrew word can also mean “a perishing Aramean.” In his hunger, “he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien.” It is part of our story that we came from foreigners, outsiders. Jacob went down few in number, just his family, but he became a great nation.

Now notice something about the story. It moves from being about Jacob to being about us. The pronoun “he” changes to “we.” “The Egyptians treated *us* harshly and afflicted us and forced us into hard labor” (as slaves). That is not something that happened to someone else; that is something that happened to us, because I understand that I am part of a people. “We cried out to Yahweh, the Lord, and he heard us. He saw that we were oppressed. And Yahweh reached down with his mighty hand and outstretched arm and brought us out of Egypt with great displays of his power, with signs and wonders. And he brought us to *this* place. He gave us *this* land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And that is why I am bringing this offering to you of the first fruits of the ground that you have given *me*—not just us as a people, but me.”

The story of my salvation is the reason I bring the offering. That’s the pattern I want you to think about this morning—and as you fill out your pledge card for next Sunday. Think about the connection between the offering and the story. It’s not ultimately because you want to obey a law that you bring an offering to God. It’s not ultimately because the church needs your support—any more than Deuteronomy mentions that the Levites *need* your food. We give an offering because of what God has done.

In the Bible—and especially in the Old Testament—story takes the place of creed. There is no ritual in which people stand and say “I believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth,” much less something as abstract as “very God of very God,” “of one substance with the Father.” Instead, the people are told to retell the story, in a very short form. God is not defined by his attributes as in classical theology. God is defined by what he does. The God we worship, the God to whom we present offerings, is the God who rescues. He is the God who takes the side of the alien and the oppressed, who listens to the cries of the hurting and reaches out to save them. We do not know God primarily because—as in Islam—he supposedly dictated a book about himself

in his words—but because God has acted in history, in the history of Israel, in the history of Jesus, and in our own histories as the latest to be rescued by God.

This gets to the heart of our faith. Do we believe a bunch of stuff about God that we have been taught? Or do we believe that God has really done certain amazing things in history that show his power over evil and death? Do I stand before God on the basis of his revealed attributes, or do I stand before God on the basis of the story of what God has done for me? If the heart of your faith is story-faith, you don't have to answer all the questions; you don't have to explain how justice and mercy fit together, or how freedom and providence work in the same person. You don't know why everything happened the way it did: you just know the story of what God did, and that is enough.

That story is the reason for the offering. You don't give an offering in order to get the approval of a deity, but because Yahweh has already acted to save you. He already brought you out of slavery into freedom; he lifted you up out of the miry clay and set you upon a rock. Therefore, Lord, I bring you the first fruits.

If your offering is a small thing to you—if it is not the first fruits, but the leftovers—if it is an afterthought rather than the reason to go to God's house—I want you to think about whether you have owned the story. Have you built your existence on the story of God's rescue of his people? Do you have a story about how God saved you from being an outsider, from being enslaved, from a place of weeping and crying out to him?

As we have discovered in reading the book of Exodus together in the adult study group, the story of how God had compassion on the slaves in Egypt and brought them out with his mighty hand and brought them to a new land of blessing is *the* story of the Old Testament. The exodus event is the paradigm for salvation throughout the Bible. It's repeated when the people cross the Jordan into the land. It's repeated when the people are in exile and are brought back to the land. It's the way Hebrew prophets and psalmists talked about God's essential nature as a savior.

I don't think it's overstating the case to say that every time you see the word “saved” or “salvation” in the Bible, there are overtones of the exodus story lurking in the background. God is defined as the one who saved us and made us a people. God is the savior, the rescuer, the redeemer, and the victory he had over Egypt is the model for the victory he will have over evil in the world. In the New Testament, Jesus is pictured as a new Moses, and what he did for us in the cross and resurrection is compared to what God did for Israel in bringing them out of slavery and death into freedom and life. Colossians 1:13 (NLT) is a favorite: “He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” 1 Peter 2:9-10 says that God called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”

What is the story we tell as we bring our offerings? Let me suggest a few.

There is a Block Island story: A wandering Baptist was my ancestor. He came from England to the New World looking for freedom, but he found that the new society created by the Puritans was as oppressive as the one they left in England. They cried out to God and he brought them safely to this island, with no harbor, a lonely place no one would attack, a land eventually flowing with milk and honey. And so now I bring to you the first portion of the blessings I have received in this good land to which you brought me.

There is a First Baptist Church story: Once our ancestors had no church house, but worshiped in homes and preached for one another. We were few in number but became a town. After a hundred years we called a pastor and built a church. A century later when the wealthy

arrived and the island prospered, God blessed us with a summer chapel with a glorious organ, which became our year-round home. But then the economy collapsed and the wealthy left. The hurricane came, destroying every farm and decimating the population. Then as we were crying out to God, our church burned to the ground. But in his mercy, God provided for us. He gave us a hotel. We found refuge here and the strength to build a new house for God. So now I declare to the Lord that I have come into the house which he provided for us and give my offering with thanks for all he has done.

And we all have our individual stories. My father and mother were wanderers who were sent to Japan, where I was born. There I was taught the stories of Jesus, but there my mother was oppressed and did hard labor, and she cried out to God. He brought us to America, then to Japan, then to America, then to Japan. And finally in an experience like death he brought us back to America and to a place of healing and freedom.

But I can make it more personal: My father and mother were storytellers, but it was not my story. I learned to tell the story, but I had never lived the story of rescue. It was only when I saw the limits of my own freedom in high school, when I saw the meanness in my own heart, when I found myself in chains of my own choosing, that the story became real for me. I asked Jesus to set me free from my own nature, to lift the burden of my past. He took me by the hand and pulled me out. He brought me through the water to this grace in which I now stand.

There are so many times that story is repeated: how God rescued me from sexual confusion; how God rescued me from the need for approval; how God rescued me from a family system where I could not survive by sending me a thousand miles away; how God saved me from fundamentalism by putting compassionate and progressive evangelicals in my path; how God saved me from going to Japan so I could fulfill my mother's calling and instead brought me to New York; how God rescued me from allowing church people to define me by giving me courage to stand for something, and thereby saved my marriage.

Each of us has multiple stories, but they are variations on the same theme: once I was enslaved, but God set me free. I once was lost, but now am found; I was dead but now I am alive. God heard my cries and brought me out with his mighty hand and strong arm and brought me to this place, to this moment, and I have survived to tell it.

That is why, God, I bring this offering: the best that I have, the first not the last, as a way to thank you, as a way to say that everything I am and everything I have is because of you. Without you I would have no story. Without you I would not be part of this people. So I offer not just this basket of crops, not just this plate of checks, but myself. I am an offering. All that I have, all that I am, all that I hope to be, I give to you.