

A Sermon Preached by

Fr. Ralph Osborne for the First Sunday of Lent, Year C

February 21, 2010 at [St. Thomas Church](#), Menasha, Wisconsin

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#) | [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#) | [Romans 10:8b-13](#) | [Luke 4:1-13](#)

On my mom's side, I am the second generation of the family born in America. My mother was born in America, but both of her parents were born in Italy. In the past few years, I have gotten copies of pictures of when the family first came to the United States. Like so many others, they came to the U.S. looking for a land flowing with milk and honey. If my mom's memory is right, my grandfather was sick when he came to the U.S. by boat. His diet had been so bad back in Italy, that he was ill. They were looking for the Promised Land and believed they found it. The rest of the family looks back at the pictures and imagines what life was like for them before they came here and then soon after they arrived. Life moved from being unsettled to being settled and prosperous. I'd like to be able to ask them questions about the journey. I would like to know if they were thankful. I imagine that they were very thankful.

In our Old Testament lesson, Moses is preaching to the people of God. It was a sermon much longer than this one. If my face glowed, you would get a longer one too. Moses is preparing the people of God for their transition from wandering in the desert, to passing through Ellis Island, into the Holy Land. As your life settles and you begin to prosper in this land of plenty, you will be tempted to forget who you are and how you got here. You may get amnesia and convince yourself that the blessings you have are because of something you accomplished. You might forget that God led you here, was faithful and blessed you.

Instead of getting amnesia, when you pray to God, say this, "My father was a wandering Aramean, who went down to Egypt, lived there as an alien, became a great nation, was treated harshly by the Egyptians, put into slavery and after crying out, was delivered by God." Our translation misses the point. By being politically correct in saying "ancestor", it misses the point that we are to say, "Our father did this". Our history is only one generation back. We entered the land flowing with milk and honey only one generation back. It wasn't our grandparents' generation; it was our parents' generation. So, Moses says, this is what I want you to do and say, "So now I bring the first fruits of the ground that you, O lord have given me". Can you here this? Moses is telling them to bring their tithe to God. That's what the first fruits are. After we bring the first fruits, then we celebrate together with the Levites and aliens that live among us the bounty God has given us. It is part of our remembering that we are vulnerable and have been delivered by God himself. As we bring our tithe to God in the offering today, we are remembering that we are freed slaves and beggars who have been blessed by God; just one generation ago.

To bad this isn't October. This would be a good stewardship sermon! You've already pledged though, so you are off the hook and don't have to pray again about what God wants you to do with your giving.....

Well, when you have entered the Promised Land, when where you are living is flowing with milk and honey; you don't want to go back to the wilderness. You did your time in the desert and going back there is way down on your list. When the people of God left Egypt and wandered in the desert, they wanted to go back to Egypt. It was difficult to trust God in the desert. They wanted to be settled and to have plenty. Once you are in the Promised Land, no more desert thank you very much!

Today we look at how Jesus went back in. in fact the Spirit lead him into the desert. Why would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into the Judean wilderness? Was it to test him? Was it to get him ready for the start of His ministry? Was it a retreat? Many of the men of our parish and of the diocese are going to the wilderness next weekend. It will be a bit colder than the desert Jesus went into. The men are being led by the Holy Spirit (we pray) to hear from God about their lives and be blessed and empowered to do the will of God. I have always been struck by the purpose of "Unshackled". Their purpose is to get us to face ourselves and think. That's not a bad way to look at Lent.

Lent is our time to journey with Christ into the desert/wilderness. We often see the desert as only a bad place. It is the place where we are when our lives break down and things have gone wrong. That is not the purpose of the desert experience in scripture. The desert is a place of death and life. It is a place where it is almost impossible not to meet with God.

When I visited the Holy Land, the Sinai desert was a place of great holiness for me. When the jeeps left the main road, I expected them to drop us off a few hundred feet into the desert. Instead, they drove for miles and miles. We weren't driving on roads, we were driving on sand. I knew we were going to be spending the night, and I thought it would be prudent to do that near a road, near civilization. On and on we went. They dropped us off at our campsite and then they drove off! The effect worked! We were given the hospitality of the Bedouins for our supper and then for breakfast. We then hiked down a desert valley to an even more isolated spot. We were read the scripture that corresponded to that area and then spent considerable time in silence. God is there.

I also learned a bit about first fruits and sharing with others. Our guide took us to high place to look down in a valley. There I saw an oasis. There were people way in the distance coming toward us from the oasis. It was then I asked the question. Have you ever asked a question and then just known that you were going to get an answer? I asked the question, 'Who owns the oasis?' The guide was gracious with my ignorance. No one owns the oasis. The oasis is life here and no one can own it.

Today we face ourselves on the first Sunday of Lent. We ask ourselves if we will journey into the wilderness with Jesus. Will we risk leaving our settled lives behind and learn about how we are provided for? Will we ask forgiveness for our amnesia. Will we confess to God how we have forgotten his providence and care? Will we be still and listen for God to meet with us in our quiet place?