

1st Sunday in Lent
March 10th, 2019
Rev. Michael S. Plank
Hudson Falls, NY

"If Anyone Can Do It, You Can"

Text: *Deuteronomy 26:5: "Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous.'"*

Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that we are descended from generations of survivors to the end that hearers will claim their heritage and realize that they can withstand their current suffering.

Prayer for Illumination: God of the Ages, you have been faithful to us since the very beginning. Be faithful, we pray, for a few minutes more. Open our minds and hearts to hear what you say, and guide us with your Word. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address to his people before his death. He doesn't make it into the Promised Land. But he tells his people what to do when they arrive. Listen for God's Word.

Johann and Margaret walked the streets of Rotterdam. It had rained all day and the mud mixed with the waste that people tossed out their windows to make a stinking muck that stuck to your shoes and caked your legs. Not that it much mattered, they still had the muck from yesterday's walk on their clothes. And from the day before. Their stomachs growled, but they didn't have money for dinner. They passed a doorway where a constable threw a teacher out into the street and beat him a few times before he ran off. Things were not good in Rotterdam.

But Johann and Margaret were smiling and giggling like children. They were going to see their friends Niels and Elisabeth. And they were giddy with excitement because tomorrow, Niels and Elisabeth were sailing across the ocean to America. They had scrimped and saved every penny, borrowed from every relative, worked every job for a year and had miraculously booked passage on a ship that would take them out of the political, religious, and economic turmoil of the Netherlands and over to the New World. Not that Johann and Margaret could afford to go. But they could dream, and they could live vicariously through their friends.

They would celebrate tonight. They had found a bottle of wine and they would toast their dear friends, who in all probability, they would never see again. They arrived at the docks and Elisabeth greeted them. She brought them on board and excitedly showed them the modest quarters she and Niels would share for the next few weeks. They laughed and joked and opened the wine. After a bit, the captain poked his head in. He smiled and told Johann and Margaret that since the ship didn't leave until the next day, they were welcome to stay the night. They finished their wine and opened a bottle that Niels and Elisabeth had packed. They talked long into the night and finally fell asleep.

In the morning, Johann and Margaret opened their eyes and felt the room sway back and forth. A night of wine can do that to you. But when they stumbled up on deck they were horrified to see that the boat was miles and miles from land. They ran to the captain who today, was stone-

faced. They begged him to turn back but he told them the journey had begun and he demanded payment for their passage. They of course could not pay. So the captain called the Boatswain and had them put in chains. When they landed in America, they were sold as indentured servants to pay for the voyage.

For seven years they worked to earn their freedom. When they landed, their family name, Blankenburg, was clunky for the Americans. So it was shortened to Blank, but then changed to something better sounding: Plank. My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and established a family. My father was a wandering Dutchman. He went down into America with his wife and lived there and started a family.

That was seven generations ago. For the Israelites who heard this instruction from Moses, it was centuries ago. The father Moses mentions is of course Abraham – the one whose name means “Father of a multitude.” And the story he captures in a sentence or two is the story of the birth of a nation. Moses gives this particular instruction on the border of the Promised Land.

You remember that the Israelites complained in the wilderness during the Exodus. You remember that their longing for Egypt became so great that God finally said that not one adult who had been alive when they left Egypt would make it to the Promised Land except for Joshua and

Caleb. You remember that God allowed Moses to see the Promised Land before he died, but that he would not enter it. And so on the edge of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the people who would inherit it: those whose parents had been slaves in Egypt.

And Moses said, "Remember where you came from." Remember that Abraham took Sarah and went down into Egypt because there had been a famine. And after that God had made a covenant that Abraham and Sarah would birth a nation. And they had Isaac. And Isaac had Jacob and Esau. And Jacob had 12 sons, one of whom was Joseph who was sold to the Egyptians. And Joseph rose in power and developed a plan to save the people when the next famine came. And Joseph's brothers and his father Jacob came into Egypt again for relief from the famine. And they settled there, and as the famine went on and they ran out of money to pay for food, they traded their labor for food. And they became slaves, and they grew in number. And generations later, a new king arose, who did not know Joseph. And he oppressed the Israelites. And God sent Moses and Aaron to deliver them. And there were plagues, and there was a flight through the Red Sea. And there was wandering in the wilderness. And there were battles with nations of giants. And there was suffering and hardship as this group of several hundred thousand learned how to be a people. And they arrived at the edge of the Promised Land. And Moses said, "Remember where you came from."

Go into the land, that one flowing with milk and honey. Go build houses and settle down. Go experience the bounty of the earth. Go revel in abundance that, after 40 years in the wilderness, you can scarcely imagine. And then, when you pick the first heads of grain and the first grapes, bring them to the Priest and offer them to God. And say to the priest, "My father was a wandering Aramean. He suffered, but survived. As did his children. As did my parents. But God has brought us to this place and given us all we have." And then go, and rejoice in all the good things God has given to you and your household.

We are in the season of Lent. That season of preparation before Easter. That time before our greatest liturgical rejoicing. Forty days to pause before we rejoice, and to make sure we're prepared for what that rejoicing really means. Forty days to gather our firstfruits and remember that our parents were wandering Arameans who went through the fires for us to get to where we are. Forty days for penitence, for purification, for perspective, for awe and gratitude.

And this reading that starts off this season reminds us of what Moses reminded the Israelites: that we come from generations of survivors. There's a myth called the American Dream - that you can come to this country with nothing and pull yourself up by your bootstraps to end up successful. That was not the story for most immigrants in the beginning, and it isn't the story today. Countless thousands died along the way. Countless thousands were exploited and died penniless and anonymously.

But those of us who are here all have that bootstrap story in our past, because we are lucky enough to have come from the survivors. We didn't earn that. Our ancestors did.

In our blood, in our history, for every one of us, is survival. Every one of us has stories in our family, whether we know them or not, of people overcoming tremendous odds. It is a tragic fact that the people who didn't survive have no children to tell their stories today. But our ancestors did. Not because we're special, but because we're lucky enough to have been born to the survivors. Which means that surviving hardship is our heritage. It is our birthright.

Marcus Aurelius, that great Stoic philosopher and emperor of Rome said, "If anything is within the powers and province of man, believe that it is within your own compass as well." In other words, if anyone has ever done it, it means that you can do it too. Which means no matter what you are going through right now, you know that somewhere, sometime somebody went through something every bit as bad, maybe worse, and came through the other side. And if they did it, you can do it. And better news yet, those people are your parents and your grandparents. You come from survivors. And overcoming hardship is in your blood. Your father was a wandering Aramean, your mother was a wandering Celt.

My father was a wandering Dutchman. My mother was a wandering pioneer who crossed the prairies in a covered wagon. My father fought in

the Whisky Rebellion. My mother was sold to a wealthy family when her parents couldn't afford to keep her and her 6 siblings. My father lost multiple siblings and then survived his first wife's suicide and his second wife's death from disease. My mother came from a family where relatives were murdered over gambling debts. My father lost his mother when he was a boy. My mother made it through a family conflict that tore sisters and brothers apart for ten years. And here, I stand before you today, the son of survivors. One who comes into this season of Lent bearing the gifts that they have given me and ready to prepare for the celebration. **Amen.**