

Sermon Draft

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Sermon: “The Journey Begins”

There’s a shadow over the land, evil and murder and darkness are all around. There’s the stench of fear, and the ground shakes with those who march for war. It’s the second book in Lord of the Rings trilogy, during the battle of Helm’s Deep, when King Theoden says, “And so it begins.”

Today is the First Sunday in Lent. Each year we enter this journey into Lent for forty days. In the season of Lent, we focus on the journey that represents our entire life, from font to grave. In our text today, God commands Israel to recount their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. It put life in perspective for Israel, as our Lenten journey does for us.

As we ***“walk through this valley of the shadow of death,”*** focusing on our journey with Christ to his cross and empty tomb enables us to ***“fear no evil”*** even though evil and murder and darkness are all around for we are united to Christ, our Redeemer. As God commanded Israel in our text, so this week this past Wednesday night and this morning we enter the Lenten journey once again, and our text shows us where we’re headed.

Recounting Israel's journey from slavery to freedom pictures our journey in Christ. "And so, it begins." ***"When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance," Israel was told, "you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose. . . . And you shall make response before the Lord your God"*** (vs. 1, 2, 5).

Israel remembers her slavery: ***"The Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor"*** (v 6). Joseph became second to Pharaoh, but Joseph died, and Israel had grown great in number. A new Pharaoh rules over Egypt, this Pharaoh feels threatened by so many Israelites. And so, Egypt set taskmasters over Israel and forced them into harsh bondage. Their lives became bitter, making brick and mortar to build the Egyptian empire.

Had God not seen the affliction and suffering of his people? Had he not heard their cries over the evil treatment of Pharaoh and the whips of the taskmasters? When God sent Moses to deliver his people, Pharaoh's heart became hardened, placing even more evils upon Israel, harsher taskmasters.

Cyril of Jerusalem taught Christians in the fourth century that Pharaoh is a figure for Satan, that most bitter and cruel tyrant of sin and evil, who seeks to strip us of salvation and devour us and drag us into the torments of hell. The old evil foe attacks us every day and desires to bring deadly woe upon us. He uses great guile, slyness, and treachery to fight against us, to wear us down, and to destroy us. He sets the riches of the world before us, and soon we are enticed to make them our idol for seventy or eighty years and lose the Promised Land of eternal life with Christ.

He whispers in the ears of evil people to deceive us and lie to us and hurt us. He revels in our sickness; he antagonizes our doubts; he brings gloom to our fears, all so that we might curse God and die. Satan and sin and death they are cruel taskmasters; they tighten the cords of our bondage. There is no good in Satan and his minions. They pursue us constantly and treat us harshly and humiliate us and lay on us hard labor, suffering, pain, doubt, and dread. This is our journey on earth not forty days, but forty years times two and more!

Israel reconfirms her repentance: ***“Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression”*** (v 7).

Lent always confronts us with our sin, the sin that enslaved us to the evil one in the first place. Where Jesus in the wilderness was tempted ferociously by the devil, we didn't even put up a good fight. So, the prophet Joel cries out as we begin our Lenten journey, ***“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”*** (Joel 2:13).

So, John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”*** (Matthew 3:2). So, Jesus' very first words recorded in Mark's Gospel are ***“The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”*** (Mark 1:15). So, we fall on our knees in repentance to our merciful God.

We have an advantage each Lent: we know the end of our journey, Christ's cross and open tomb.

We know God's grace and mercy and love for his wayward children under the tyranny of Satan and this wicked generation. We know Jesus turned aside all Satan's temptations, so that his obedience counts for us. We know the power of the cross, forgiveness for all the world's sin.

And so, at the beginning of this Lenten journey, at the beginning of each new day, at the beginning of each new journey in life that takes us to old age, we return to Christ. We kneel before the Lord and say in faith, ***"I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them"*** (LSB, pp 184, 213). And God says to us through the living voice of his called and ordained servant, ***"Your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."*** Throughout our journey in life, we cry to the Lord, and he forgives us!

Israel retells God's deliverance: ***"The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. . . . He brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey"***

(vs 8, 9). The holy land of Canaan was promised to Abraham 680 years before our text. There were times when it seemed nearly impossible that God could or should make good on his promise. Abraham sinned often, Jacob tricked his father for the inheritance that belonged to his brother Esau, and the sins of Jacob's sons led Joseph and the Israelites into Egypt for hundreds of years. But God always makes good on his promises.

God sent Moses to Pharaoh with his direct command: ***"Let my people go!"*** After many plagues, Pharaoh's hardened heart, and then the death of the firstborn and the Passover with Israel's doors marked with blood Pharaoh was no match for God! Pharaoh let the people go.

But not so fast! Satan and sin and death don't give up that quickly! Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued Israel to the banks of the Red Sea. Israel was trapped and doomed!

There was the stench of fear, and the ground shook with those who marched for war!

Israel's God was in the outstretched arm of Moses. Moses stretched his arm over the Red Sea, and God divided the water so that Israel passed through on dry ground. Pharaoh's army and chariots pursued them, and, again, through the outstretched arms of Moses, God brought the water over the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen. Moses and the people sang, ***"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation"*** (Exodus 15:1–2).

Israel was now on their journey to the land God promised, a land flowing with milk and honey. God delivered Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land. This is the greatest redemptive act of God in the entire Old Testament.

But all this is a foreshadowing of the greatest redemptive act of God in all history for all mankind, the eternal salvation of sinners and the restoration of all creation. Cyril of Jerusalem is magnificent here! He said: Moses was sent from God to Egypt, as Jesus was sent from the Father into the world. Moses was to lead a people in bondage out of Egypt, as Jesus came to rescue all creation under the bondage of sin. Moses was to paint the blood of a lamb upon his doorpost to avoid death, as Jesus came to shed his blood and paint it into your soul. Now eternal death passes over you!

While with the outstretched arm of Moses God delivered Israel from that devilish Pharaoh, with outstretched arm God in the flesh hung on the cross, taking the place of us all. With outstretched arms, Jesus hangs on a cross and declares, ***“Father, forgive them”*** (Luke 23:34), and we are released from bondage to sin and eternal death; the chains fall powerless!

With outstretched arms, Jesus bleeds a blood that washes us clean and opens the doors of paradise, a promised land in which we will live forever, a land flowing with life and joy and peace.

With outstretched arms, Jesus delivered us from the devil and crushed his head. He has triumphed gloriously!

Our Lenten journey therefore turns into our Easter eternity. Lent only lasts for a moment, but Easter lasts a lifetime and forever. This is our baptismal faith while we live on this earth, we live in Lent and Easter at the same time. We sin, we grieve, we suffer, we repent. And in the waters of your Baptism, daily we are forgiven; daily we are children of paradise.

And so, it begins our Lenten journey. Once again, we give particular focus to our life in Christ, which includes our good works, our worship of him, our love toward our neighbor.

And so it begins, our entire life in Christ, from font to grave, loving God and loving neighbor as we are grafted into the Vine, Jesus Christ, from whom we have life and eternal salvation.

Lent is a microcosm of life's journey from font to grave. We enter this Lent with the confidence of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, as he journeys to the cross and rises from the dead for us, to rescue us, to save us eternally, and to take us to his eternal kingdom. And so it begins again.

Amen