

Beyond the wilderness (Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

Deuteronomy offers instructions for what to do after not 40 days but 40 years of wandering.

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I'll be honest: some years I'd offer a not-small amount to have the lectionary serve up this Deuteronomy reading during "stewardship season" instead of at the beginning of Lent.

What a treat it would be, as we're attempting to forecast year-end results and budgets for the following year, to ponder a scripture passage focused on first-fruits giving as an act of worship.

Instead we're staring down Lent, and it can feel a little disjointed from the other readings to hear these verses from Deuteronomy (as opposed to the ones Jesus quotes in the Gospel), until we remember this: these are instructions given to the Israelites about what to do when they reach the other side of the wilderness. These are instructions for what to do after not 40 days but 40 years of wandering—biblical time-telling for not just a long time, but a really, really time.

In the midst of their journey, they do not always believe that they will make it out the other side. They think it might be better to return to their lives of slavery than to keep moving to freedom. They do not always trust that God is with them, as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. So this reading contains celebration instructions that depend on a whole lot of trust.

“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.” These are future promises for a people in the midst of the wilderness. There is the promise that there will be land, and not just leftover or unwanted land but land flowing with milk and honey. For you! And you will grow things on this land, and then after you have grown them you will take them as an offering for what God has done for you. And you will celebrate all the good things that God, your God, has given you and your family—but not just you and your family but also the Levites or priests and the foreigner who lives with you.

Because in this place—after you have traveled through the wilderness for so long—you will find a home.

Perhaps it’s best that we hear this passage when it’s separated from a lot of talk about giving (yes, year-round stewardship is important, and yes, stewardship isn’t all about money), so that we (I, as a preacher) can focus on God’s promises to God’s people, and in turn their trust in God.

Because in my experience, trusting can be hard. One of the gifts of liturgy and scripture is that they remind us of these promises that carry us. We, like the Israelites, do not wander without the promises of God. We do not embark on this journey to live and trust and have faith without the assurance that the Spirit goes with us to lead us and guide us and lift us up when we need it. That’s an important message, no matter the season.