



Live Into The Story
March 10th, 2019
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta
Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Live Into The Story



The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*



The First Reading *Deuteronomy 26:1-11*

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, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

The Epistle *Romans 10:8b-13*

"The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart"

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."



Gospel *Luke 9:28-43a*

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone.'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said,

'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Just this weekend, my family and I had the opportunity to visit the Fort at Fort Yargo State Park, about 50 miles north-east of here. Now when you tell your kids that you are taking them to see a fort dating back from the late 1700's, especially when these kids have seen the dungeons in the



Tower of London and numerous battlements of English castles, plus any number of fantastical movie scenes of fortresses and battle scenes on an impossibly grand scale, a certain set of expectations starts to build.

Needless to say, it was something of a rude awakening to discover that Fort Yargo is a small wooden structure, set in a field, with pick up trucks in the gravel parking lot and a small village of people in period costume hovering at the front door. Given that we are still newbies out in the wilds of Georgia, we were undeterred by this modest beginning and made our way up to the small structure, only to discover that there was something of a party going on, on the inside.

As we walked through the front door, we knew that something wasn't quite right when we noticed the *Dunkin' Donuts* boxes on the table. I knew that they were famous for their coffee, but I hadn't known that George Washington himself had been a fan. Looking around the room, I noticed a number of other people present, who while they weren't in period costume were all dressed more or less the same, in one form or other of army fatigue, and each of whom, I also



noticed, was holding some sort of weapon. As a rather spaciouly proportioned man, who sat in a rocking chair in the corner, starting telling the kids how the house was haunted, while his counterpart every few seconds kept on asking after some unidentified Yankees, I chose not say too much out loud in case one of them decided that the revolutionary war was not yet quite over. After a blood-pressure raising twenty minutes of feigned fascination at the intricacies of late 1700's war enactments, we offered our thanks, and ran for our lives.

18th century forts, *Dunkin' Donuts*, and resident ghosts - sometimes the story you are seeing play out before you doesn't quite seem to fit. Of course, we can feel the same way about our own life can't we, or our work, or our marriage, or where it is that life appears to have taken us. The story just doesn't seem right, not really what we think it should be.



Lent is a gift for us, especially should we find ourselves in any way unsure of the story unfolding before us, because it offers us a reorientation, a placing of our life's stories into the grand story of salvation history. As it is, it is a story that is no stranger to loss and suffering, yet, as former Dean of Grace Cathedral, Alan Jones, says, it is also a story which reminds us that the worst word we might have to say about ourselves is not the last word, for that last word is life, life risen out of the ashes of Lent.

This journey always leads to the same glorious place, of Jesus' resurrection and our own, in Christ. Yet the invitation of Lent is not merely for us to doze our way through these forty days trusting that all will be well in the end. Lent is an invitation to make our own way into the wilderness, for the wilderness is our teacher, a spare place cleared of the usual trappings of self-delusion and easy contentment, a place we enter not at our peril, but in the hope of our transformation. And so my encouragement to you this holy season of Lent is to let the story sweep you up, and to find yourself anew within it.



If you began your Lenten journey this year with Ash Wednesday services here, or if you happened to notice the ash-smearred foreheads of your colleagues and neighbors this past week, it is possible that you had already entered the story where all of our stories begin: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the complex cacophony of seven and a half billion human lives all sharing an origin in the dirt. Dirt made human, the one human made man and woman, the first family made a world-wide human family. This isn't science, and was never intended to be a history of the beginning of our species; this is theology, the word about God that we tell one another to make sense not of our earthly origins but our heavenly one.

You and I belong to the same source. As our beautiful children's choirs sing, 'All God's critters got a place in the choir', which is a true and a resplendently beautiful thing to proclaim. What's more, our one origin in God is a story we share that really matters because it is in that belief that we find our ultimate answer to bigotry in all its forms. When churches and politics say that some sexual orientations are welcome but not others, or when we draw lines along race,



or gender, or economic status to divide one another, we say, as people of the story of God, that we are all of that one first story; each belonging to one another believing that in God none of us is left out, that all of us belong, each to the other.

Should today be the day when your Lenten journey most comes into view, then today's origin story makes an almost equally mythic beginning with the proclamation that this three-fold tale of the great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has its start in this one, beautifully elusive statement we heard read in Deuteronomy this morning: '*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor*'. The one who went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, a place of hardship and suffering and of not belonging for four hundred years. Some believe this Aramean to be Jacob, others Abraham, yet the identity matters less than the point on offer: that as much as our ultimate origins share one beginning in one person, Adam, the story of our opening act as a people is not one of easy settlement or some grand vision of inclusion; our common life's origin is as those who



wandered along a desert way, not first into a land of promise but first into a land where we were not welcome.

In many ways, then, the people of the Abrahamic faiths have a story that inclines us to find common ground with the alien, with the wanderers of the earth, with those who cross borders in hope of a better life or simply in hope of having a life at all. For as much as Christianity became an establishment religion, the beginnings of our story place us quite differently. We make our start as the people of God not in certainty with regards to our place in the world, but in an uncertain home. With more displaced people alive today in the world than there have ever been, at nearly 70 million people, our work in this church among refugees and our voices that might be used to promote the needs of those displaced around the world, matter not only because the need is so great but because at the beginning of things their story is also our story.



Yet, the arc of history's story of the plight of human suffering does not end in lament - the worst story we can tell about ourselves is not the last - rather it ends in resurrection. We strive for the dignity of every human being not only because it is right to do so, but because we trust that this is how the story is meant to end, in risen and restored life.

However, as Luke's gospel telling of Jesus' rendezvous with Satan reminds us, it is so easy for us to get the story wrong, isn't it. Ask for more than you need, worship power that is not truly power, expect God to rescue you from trouble - these are the untruths of the good news according to the devil told in the desert places of our lives. You may not believe in such mythic figures, but you don't really need to, to have the point come home. How many of us have seen the temptation on the horizon to enter into another story than the one we have been living, I wonder? Another relationship that might somehow bypass the brokenness of the one we can't seem to fix ourselves? How many have been sold into modern day slavery, I wonder, by the loan shark's easy solution to crippling debt? How many teenagers make their way too early into an adult's world with the



promise of relationships that won't sustain, and behaviors they are not ready for, as children become parents themselves?

Yet there is hope, for the devil does not prevail with our Lord in the wilderness because he gets the story wrong. Jesus has not come for dominion, or to somehow offer a living test of God's power or goodness. Jesus is the arc in the narrative where God becomes the story, set within not beyond the scene unfolding, subject to the same hardship and striving that you and I are. That is the story, of God's utter solidarity with us and with all people, through which all of the story is to be told. And Lent is the passage of the journey that has the power to teach us again, should our lives be open to its lessons, that you and I are living legacies of God's story of hope and salvation, precisely because God gives Godself over to be in the mix with us, making the divine story our own and the human story God's.



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So, my dear saints of God, I pray that you might find yourself in this Lenten story, in this story of our origins, in this story of God drawing near to you, right to the heart of your life. For it is not only a story to live by, but a story to live into, of hope set free from fear and scarcity, not because we were tempted to believe our trials might be passed over, but because we saw that there was no need in our lives or in our world for the demons to set the agenda for the present and future of human flourishing.

Live into the story this Lent. Discover the power inherent in you to be a living legacy of the saving power of Christ's risen life, even in the wilderness places of this world and of your heart. This is but the opening act of an eternal promise. Remember the Lord your God, for that everlasting Love has come to set you free.