

*Based on *Deuteronomy 26:1-11. Moses Institutes The Ritual of First Fruits*

**incarnational translation below*

The words that emerged from my lips last week when I tore my hamstring are not fit to speak in this sanctuary. Let's just say the Lord's name was taken in vain!

The words spoken by my Deacon Shepherd, however, who learned of the injury the following day, are far more appropriate to share: moans of compassion and solidarity; offers to cook a meal or organize a trip to the doctor; promises of prayers ascending and continuing until the injury heals; all concluding with a heartfelt admonition: *Don't forget you have a church!*

Isn't that the truth?

We have a church! We have a community in the tradition of care through the Spirit of God that stretches back millennia, as evidenced in our Lesson today. Don't forget, Moses reminds the people, who stand at the edge of the wilderness, you have a church! When our world falls apart, and we cry out in agony, Moses says, our Mama Bear God - often in the form of a Deacon Shepherd - claws us out from the clutches of despair and leads us to a land that flows with milk and honey. Or at least ice packs and Advil. When ruin and defeat threaten our very existence, Moses says, God offers refuge and strength instead, followed by an ever-expanding circle of support to shift us from a mindset of merely surviving to actively thriving.

Don't forget, Moses says, we have a church!

And then, in a ritual of remembrance, Moses proposes a posture of gratitude for that church and for the God who makes that church possible. Yes, we have been through a *lot*, Moses admits in the words of this ritual. From famine to forced labor. From conflicted community to existential crisis. But look! Moses says. We are right on the edge of the land of promise and plenty. We can actually see it, right there, Moses says. And we *will* cross over this threshold of hope. And we *will* find a way to make a new and fruitful life. And *when we do*, Moses insists, we must not forget how we got here. Through the leading of a God who just wants us to *be well*. And the caring of a congregation that just wants us to be *one*.

This is our story, too, here at SPC on this Stewardship Sunday 2022. We have been through a *lot*, to be sure, and not just these past few years of COVID in the midst of a major staffing and pastoral. Don't forget where this congregation came from, we say today, stretching all the way back to those forty-something years ago when my predecessor magically appeared out of an apple orchard to grow what was then a thirty-member worshipping community with a crumbling building to what is now a 300 member hallmark of hope for anyone who longs for meaning and belonging in a culture of increasing disconnect. Indeed, just a few weeks ago, a member of the Eastern Panhandle Community Remembrance Project described SPC as *the bastion of justice and loving-kindness in the entire panhandle*.

There really is something special going on here, no doubt about it. And it is far bigger than any one person, especially the Pastor. Yes, we have gifted leadership in music and administration, spiritual formation and children and youth education. Even more than that, though, we have the faithful, dedicated day-in-day-out devotion of everyone in this community: offering meaning, hope, and belonging through every phone call you make, every card you send, every prayer shawl you knit, every piece of liturgical art you hang up, every committee meeting after committee meeting after committee meeting after committee meeting you attend, every Habitat donation you make, every strategic planning session in which you participate, every heartfelt transformation you make through anti-racism training in adult education, every smile you offer a visitor as an usher, every Sunday Studio lesson you teach, every insight into the week's Lesson you share during Teach the Preacher or a Worship Planning Team, every covered dish you cook for the Community Meal or for a sibling in need, every beautifully prepared communion service you put together, every budget and expense report you print out, every light bulb you change or burning bush you prune, every night you stay awake to provide shelter for those without permanent housing, every bell you ring for climate justice, every solo or ensemble you offer as special music, every hymn sing you host, every alternative Christmas Market you shop, every advocacy effort you make with the Poor People's Campaign, every witness against racism you make in the public square, every thanksgiving meal you host for the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and let's never forget every livestream broadcast and geek squad panic response you make from our tech team that keeps us wired in the only ways that really matter.

What a church! What a Holy Spirit flowing in us and through us! Do not take this for granted!

The gift of SPC does not happen by magic, although it does indeed feel like something of a miracle. The miracle happens when we choose our mystical connection and its tangible fruits in community as a *priority*, as the *first* thing we take care of once we get settled, as our Lesson reminds us.

This includes our pledges of financial support.

The ancient Israelites, of course, pledge their support in an agricultural economy, bringing literal produce - their *first fruits* - to support the spiritual and missional life of the community. The ritual described by Moses in this Lesson reflects that pledge as the first ten percent of the crops of the land to be distributed among those who are not able to grow food for themselves, with a special concern for the immigrant in their midst.

This is an invitation for us, as well, although certainly not a requirement. Many of us find that a commitment to pledge 10% of our after-tax income to the ministry of SPC reflects the kind of ritual Moses encourages in this text, as a practice of gratitude for the gifts God has placed in our care, even in our current economy, and as a promise to provide for others who struggle far more than we do. The SPC Session, as well, has just this past week decided to make a similar commitment from the resources of this community: pledging 10% of the income we receive from the congregation to mission giving beyond ourselves.

Ten percent is a lot for many of us, especially in these challenging times, and so others pledge a designated dollar amount to support SPC that reflects our gratitude for the role of this congregation in our lives and in the

community. No matter what we pledge - and no matter how we go about deciding on our pledge - please know every gift is received with gratitude, in the spirit described by Moses in our Lesson. Every gift is stewarded toward the vision of a big party in the reign of God where all have been given what we need to thrive.

Yes, it is true, we have been through *a lot* as a congregation. *And* we are so incredibly blessed as a congregation. We are right on the edge of the wilderness, ready to cross over into that land of promise and plenty where something new and exciting - maybe even *more* exciting than where we have already been! - is just waiting for us to claim it. Ready to shift our mindset from simply surviving all this change to actively thriving on the other side of it.

In the meantime, on this Stewardship Sunday 2022, when your hamstring is howling through ice packs and Advil, as my Deacon Shepherd says, Don't forget you have a church. When COVID is catching you off-guard three years into a global pandemic, don't forget you have a church. When you're trying to give your kids hope for how to get through crazy times, don't forget you have a church. And on this Stewardship Sunday, when you get a little bit settled, with a little bit of time to decide where to pledge your time and your talent and your treasure - or your participation and your engagement and your finances - please, beloved friends, don't forget you have a church.

Let that church say, Amen!

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11*

The people gather at the edge of the land of promise and plenty,
receiving one last list of instructions from Moses:

Once you get settled into your new home -
land which your generation holds in trust from God,
so that generations to come may thrive -
take some of the first produce
that you are able to grow
put it in a basket,
and go to church.

When you arrive, tell the people,
“I made it!
Here I am,
settled in my new home,
ready to thrive!”

Put the basket of first fruits on the Table
and recite this litany:
“My father, a Syrian,
nearly died at the hands of his brothers.
Instead he landed in Egypt,
where eventually his family
also found refuge from famine.
There he became a large, prosperous nation,
until the Egyptians forced us into slavery.
We cried out to the God of our ancestors,
who heard our cry,
and saw our lives of weary despair.
With fierce strength,
like a Mama Bear,
God clawed us out from the clutches of Egypt.
God brought us here,
to this land flowing with milk and honey!
Almost Heaven!
Hallelujah!
We can thrive here!
Thanks be to God!”

Once you have placed your basket of first fruits on the table
and recited the litany,
offer a deep bow to the community
in honor of the God of your ancestors.
Then throw a big party!
Invite the neighbors.
All of them!
Including the ones
who are not yet as settled as you are,
and especially the immigrants.

"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, 62).*