

### Call to Worship

We come to meet our God, present in Jesus Christ, who stands with us in the wilderness of our journeying, looking directly into the faces of our temptations and guides the directions we will take.

**We will meet this Christ here.**

### Prayer of Invocation

Lord, we sit with our realities and questions, always seeking to find the divine life you have working within us, and waiting for the courage to decide who we will be.

**Meet with us now, Holy Spirit. Meet with us in this moment of pausing, that we may know you more truly and know ourselves more clearly as we live each day before us in faith. Amen.**

### The Word

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Common English Bible

Once you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the LORD your God is giving you, and put it in a basket. **Then go to the location the LORD your God selects for his name to reside. Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: "I am declaring right now before the LORD my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us."**

The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the LORD your God's altar. Then you should solemnly state before the LORD your God: **"My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous.**

The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. So we cried out for help to the LORD, our ancestors' God. **The LORD heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders.**

He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. **So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, LORD, have given me."**

Set the produce before the LORD your God, bowing down before the LORD your God. **Then celebrate all the good things the LORD your God has done for you and your family— each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.**

### Living in the Word

Coming Home, by and for the Gifts of God

The gifts of God will lead us home, when we are ready to return home and when we arrive home we will receive the gifts of God. Today we begin with a short recap of the prodigal son story from Ash Wednesday:

### Prodigal story: For Son #1 - Leaving without looking back

- Took everything – not planning to return
- A land far, far away – getting as far from the issue as possible
- Wasted all that he had –Burned his bridges, out of control
- No back-up plan - figuring there is a solution somewhere out there
- Hitting bottom – feeding the pigs, hungry for their food
- Dead and Lost - Feel the ashes – they are a sign of the death and loss that we all suffer from, when we aren't traveling with God
- Process reversing:

1. Resignation to Reality I am now in
2. Humility out of Desperation - Hitting bottom means there is nowhere else to go, but up.
3. Courage from no more Pride – nothing left to lose everything to gain

This Lent, I invite you to Come Home to God. The homecoming reception is sweet! In God you will find home as it is supposed to be.

This morning I want to address all that we have to gain by coming home to God. First let's take a look at the two sons in this story. For the Son who is leaving, something has set him off and the 'grass is looking greener' somewhere other than home. As the younger son, he would not inherit, it would all go to his brother, so maybe he was just going out to make his way in the world. If so then his only real mistake was cutting ties with all that he knew.

Think of all of the immigrants, some of whom may have been your ancestors; some I know were mine, that came to America because there was not enough for them, wherever back home was. Unless they came with others from their community back home, they were pretty-much on their own. The good news for many of them was that their language barriers were what drew them to others from the same countries and we know that they settled in pockets of nationalities. Even so, it would have been difficult once you left family and friends who cared for you and each other.

Today, communications are so much easier that you can go around the world and still be connected with home. When my sister Cindy is in China we talk and see each other on Facetime and it is as if she is in the next room. Yet if you break communications and become really 'on your own' you can hit bottom. It is the same with our communications with God. If you don't make prayer a regularly scheduled think, it is easy to get out of the habit.

The younger son got lost from the connection. Once there, it takes some time and effort to reconnect. But he is ready to humbly go home and see if his dad might have a job he could do to re-acquire just the basics of food and housing. When we are lost it may take us time to remember what to say to God... Because God is always aware of us, just crying out to God is a good place to start.

For the older Son, he is feeling left out and unloved, as all of the Father's attention is on the younger son while he waits for his return and as he plans the party at his return. Some of us may have stayed at home and yet, we do not know the joy of a relationship with a loving God.

The story of the one who stayed home may be the story of those of us who have never left home and experienced the pain of separation. Because we have never felt the pain of separation, we may not realize the love that surrounds us. The relationship in which we live may seem like a duty, not a joy. Churches are full of people who live out of a sense of duty instead of experiencing the great joy of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In a minute I am going to come out to you with the microphone to ask you "As a parent today, if this was you, what would you have for your returning child?" But first, here is a list of that Father's gifts for the return of his son: *"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.'*

*<sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup> Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate."*

As a parent today, if this was you, what would you have for your returning child? Your best robe, a ring, sandals? What would your feast consist of? (go down with the microphone and ask)

The first of the gifts was that the Father had been waiting, a sure sign of his love, along with the hug and kiss. The rest of the list are not about the things but what they represented the best he had to give to celebrate. Visible signs of the depth of that Father's love. God wants us to have it all. The word prodigal, which we use to describe the younger son is:

1. *extravagantly wasteful: spendthrift or extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness*
2. *producing generous amounts: giving or producing something in large amounts*

Doesn't that describe the Father as well? Isn't the Father producing and giving generous amounts? Don't the gifts and feast sound extravagantly wasteful, to a degree bordering on reckless?

I'm sure the older son thinks so; and what must the neighbors think? They all know what the younger son has been up to and how his father has missed him. What a foolish man to put together a feast for him.

So it is with our Prodigal God, who puts out a feast for us every time we return our hearts toward home. Some would tell you that our God is foolish, always giving us another chance. Blessing us beyond what we deserve. That is God's grace: the undeserved love we receive, just by coming back home to our Creator.

Here is the catch: The party can't start, until we decide bring our heart back home. God waits for us to decide, not forcing us to return. The Bible is all about God's continual reaching out for us, wanting a relationship. When Adam and Eve had done the very thing God told them not to do, they hid in the garden. God went walking among the bushes, calling "Adam, Eve, where are you?" All through the Bible God calls people into relationship. God takes the initiative in calling Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau. God called Jonathan, David, Ruth, Naomi, Miriam, and Esther. The story of Jesus Christ reveals that same theme: God calling to us, "Bob, Anne, Carmen, Francis, where are you? I want a relationship with you. I am waiting for you to be open to receiving all that I have for you.

The scripture we read this morning was from the book of Deuteronomy, which is part of the Hebrew five books of the law or the Pentateuch. This piece of scripture consists of three speeches delivered to the Israelites by Moses on the plains of Moab, shortly before they enter the Promised Land.

The first speech recaps the forty years of wilderness wanderings which have led to this moment, and ends with a strong word for them to observe the law or teachings; the second part reminds the Israelites of the need for exclusive allegiance to one God and observance of the laws he has given them, on which their possession of the land depends; and the third speech offers the comfort that even if Israel proves unfaithful and loses the promised land, if they then will repent it can all be restored. God was and still is, extravagantly building relationship with a whole community, not just individuals.

How do we find the key to the prizes? Do we have to remove ourselves from God and go far away? Do we have to wander in a desert for 40 years? Sadly, some people still do. Lent is an opportunity for us to focus individually and as a community on the key to all that God wants us to receive. It is not so much about what you give up, but what you have to gain. Both sons had to lose themselves to gain the true prizes. God is waiting for you to come home. God is waiting for us as a community of faith to come home together. The message of this day is that God's mercy and love are available to you and to us. The key...All you have to do is find your way home.

'Home is where the heart is' is a familiar plaque, sometimes seen in people's houses. The heart of who we are as God's people is all of our hearts together finding God and showing others how to find home. Where is your heart today? Coming home is a great feeling when you know what God has waiting for you...this Lent as you are seeking God, where is your heart?

Prayer: Lord, we pray for ourselves as we seek to find our way home to you, (pause). We pray for all who need to find you and home the most and for the ones who think that they need it the least. (pause) We pray for the most courageous among us and for the most cowardly. (pause) We pray for the most intelligent and the most humble. (pause) We pray for each of us, that we will find during this Lent what you want for us, our true authentic happiness. Help us to see things clearly. Amen.