

## The One Big Story

Every year for the past 10, I've participated in a unique "Lenten disciple" called Lent Madness. In case you've never heard about it, here's how it works: Over the course of the season, participants learn about the lives of men and women- many are very ordinary folk - who are saints of the church. What makes it unique is that, like its inspiration March Madness, it is set up as a single elimination tournament with 32 saints in brackets. Every day, people all over the world read about two of the featured saints and vote on one to move forward to the next round. The Saintly Sixteen, the Elate Eight, the Faithful Four...finally the "winner" is crowned with the Golden Halo just before Easter.

It's all a lot of fun and often silly - this week so far I've learned about the first Christian deacon and a Bohemian prince, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet and a French nun, a Norwegian king and a young Algonquin-Mohawk woman.

At the same time I am reminded of two meaningful things every year:

First, our faith was handed down to us from people of all sorts who lived faithful lives in a variety of cultures, nations, and eras. These dedicated people show us that if the light of Christ can burn brightly in their ordinary lives, then there is a chance that light can burn in our lives as well.

Second, the inspiration of these saintly lives comes to us as stories. And indeed, our whole tradition is small stories like theirs that make up one big story - the story of God's love for us.

The stories of saints are inspirational. They allow me to think about what my faith can become, different ways to pray and witness. Some of the saints that inspire me are people you and I have actually known, women and men in our families, our congregation, our neighborhoods who have found God in the everyday struggles and celebrations of their lives and shared their discovery with us. Think of people who have encouraged you with their charity, their teaching, their comfort, and their leadership.

Like the saints, we each have unique lives and experiences of God. All our stories connect us across generations and point us toward faithful responses to God.

Yet underneath the diversity of these stories, there is one story that we all share.

A wandering Aramean was our ancestor.  
Our ancestor was a landless, homeless, destitute vagrant.

Instead of inspiring, this story grounds us. It reminds us that God was and is faithful to us.

This is the story Israel remembers and recites when making their offerings to God. The recitation of their origin story is preparation for a great celebration. As they gather the

harvest from the land God has given them, the people take it to the priest, tell this story of humble origins, and then share their harvest with those who have none.

The heart of the celebration is remembering that they, too, once had nothing. Everything they have comes from God. It is after remembering that story that the people have a great, shared feast.

I find it helpful that we read this story on the first Sunday of Lent.

The recitation of Israel's origin story in Deuteronomy is a preparation for a celebration of God's promise of land, of covenant, of faithfulness. And Lent is a season of preparation for our celebration of God's promise in Jesus Christ.

Lent is a season of preparation. The focus on penitence and spiritual disciplines like fasting and alms giving is to prepare ourselves - again - to celebrate all God has done for us, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lent is an invitation to know and experience God's presence in the earthy, needy, embodied-ness of our lives.

We are like those Israelites on the edge of the desert about to enter the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Even after all their disobedience, doubt, and complaints, they could see the promise before them. Before entering the land, they were given instructions on how to live in that land and remain faithful to God.

"You shall take some of the first of all the fruit on the ground which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you..."

The land is God's and everything you harvest from it is a gift from God.

When you offer the first fruits you will remember your ancestors, who came from nothing and to whom these extravagant gifts were originally given.

"We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice."

God heard their voice and God hears your voice.

Our story includes this story. Our story - from creation to Exodus to the Promised Land to the Exile to Jesus - reminds us over and over again that before our faith is God's faith.

God is faithful to us.

What if, after a week of going about your life at home, school, and your job, you took some ( not all, but some) of the fruits of your life and labor which all come from the gift God has given you, bring them to church on Sunday. Instead of putting it into an offering plate, walk up and give it to the priest and say:

"Today I declare to the Lord that I am living a life that is a total gift from God."

And when the priest takes your offering and sets it on the altar you say, "I am descended from people who had no land and who were oppressed. They cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard and rescued them. And the Lord brought us to a new life filled with the gifts of creation. So today, I bring you a portion of the fruits of that new life, the fruits of all you have given me."

And you set this gift before the Lord and then share it with your community, including the most vulnerable among you.

In a way we do that every week - yet sometimes we get so used to the pattern of it we might forget the story that grounds it. What you bring to the altar every week - especially your very own self - is part of a bigger story. What you bring is yours to give because the God who created all there is, who rescued a wandering Aramean, who heard the cries of oppressed people and brought them to the Promised Land- that God created and rescued and heard you, too.

Lent is a good time to remember the story of a people who came from nothing but love. We are those people, people from a variety of cultures, nations, and eras. People's whose small stories are part of the big story of God's faithfulness. Remembering that story is, perhaps, the best preparation for the celebration to come.