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Remember the Story

Deuteronomy 26:9

There is a theme park in Orlando Florida called “The Holy Land Experience.” I have not visited this park but I am told it is quite impressive. It features both the great Temple of Jerusalem and the Qumran Caves, which, in the real Israel, are located a long bus ride through the desert from Jerusalem. But in The Holy Land Experience you can go from the Western Wall of the Temple to the Qumran Caves in about three minutes. One commentator describes The Holy Land Experience in these words:

The admission fee is \$35 for adults and \$20 for children, and for that, you get to enjoy all the pleasures of the sacred sites and none of the hassles of actually being there. No need to worry about the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. Everyone gets along quite well at the Holy Land Experience. If you get hungry you can grab a bite to eat at the Oasis Palms Café, where Goliath burgers sell for \$5.95. The plaster and plywood park covers fifteen acres of Florida’s marshlands and tries to be architecturally faithful down to camel hoof prints cast in the sidewalk. People who go love the place. Simulation sells. Simulation offers all of the comforts and attractions of the real experience, but none of the dangers. In one of his famous fables Aesop noted, ‘Men often applaud imitation and hiss at the real thing.’¹

The purpose of the season of Lent is to move us beyond sugarcoated simulations to connect us to the authentic story of our faith. The authentic story always leads us through the wilderness of testing. When Luke describes Jesus’ experience of testing he connects it to the story which we find in the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy. There Moses is addressing his people at the end of their 40 years of wandering through the wilderness. Moses understands that he will not go to the promised land. The younger generation will make this journey with the guidance of a new group of leaders. This generation did not grow up in slavery. They do not remember the trauma of leaving Egypt which was so deeply imbedded in their parents. They are full of energy and unlike their parents they believe they can do anything.

Moses’ farewell speech is largely directed to this younger generation. Moses wants them to recognize that they will soon be in the Promised Land which is a culturally diverse place. They will be mixing with other peoples who worship strange gods and have values which are vastly different from their own. This new cultural setting will test their capacity to be faithful children of God. In this situation their discipline, fighting skills, and self confidence will no longer be enough.

The ultimate success of their venture will depend on their ability to remember the story that has shaped them. At the center of that story is the God who led their parents out of Egypt and never deserted them during forty years of wandering in the desert. The time in the desert was no sugarcoated simulation. It was an authentic struggle for survival. The people going through it did not know how it would end. All they could do was go forward trusting God. God did not let them down. That same God is now leading this new generation into the Promised Land. If they forget that they will lose everything.

Luke describes Jesus poised for a new beginning as well. The time in the wilderness is Jesus' last act in preparation for his public ministry. This is no sugarcoated simulation. Jesus encounters the tempter when he is weak from forty days of hunger and isolation. The tempter encourages him to think of his calling in terms of what he can achieve as a leader. The tempter wants Jesus to see himself as a talented young man who can do anything. If he can turn stones into bread the people will know that he is a leader who can provide for their physical needs. With the help of a skilled political handler like the tempter he can restore the throne of David to a place of prominence in the world. Then the poor can receive the justice for which they yearn. There is no limit to the success that Jesus can achieve if he joins forces with the tempter.

The tempter wants Jesus to turn his back on the story that has shaped his identity and to forget that he is part of a community that has been led and protected by God over many generations. But each of Jesus' responses to the tempter demonstrates that he remembers the story of those who went through the wilderness before him; "One does not live by bread alone (Luke 4:4);" "Worship the Lord your God, serve only him (Luke 4:8);" "Do not put the Lord your God to the test (Luke 4:12)." All of these responses come from the Old Testament scriptures. Jesus uses the collective memory of the people of God to frustrate and reject the tempter. Jesus remembers the story and is empowered to live as God's child and not God's rival.

One of the oldest documents in the Westminster archives is a *Manual for Members* which was printed in 1842, just seven years after this church was founded. It was presented to new members as they joined the church since they did not yet have pictorial directories. This was a way to help them remember the story of faith as they were tested in the wilderness of a nation divided over the question of slavery. It begins with a brief historical summary which describes the founding of the congregation, the calling of the first ministers, the ordaining of the first elders, and the dedication of the 1839 building. Then comes a listing of eight articles of faith and the covenant new members make with God and the church. The covenant would be read in worship with all the members standing to affirm it. That covenant includes these words:

Believing it to be your duty, to profess Christ before men, you do now...humbly and cheerfully devote yourself to God in the everlasting covenant of his grace—You consecrate all your powers to his service and glory, and relying on the promised aid of the Holy Spirit, you promise to walk, in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord; to assemble yourselves with his people, for his worship: to keep holy the Sabbath day: to maintain family and secret prayer, and to honor your high calling by a life of obedience to God, and benevolence to men.

You do join yourselves to his church, and promise to walk with it, in brotherly love and faithfulness—to submit to its government and discipline; to strive for the peace, edification and purity of the church and to walk with all its members in charity, faithfulness, and sobriety.

All this you promise and engage.

We then, as a church of Jesus Christ, do affectionally receive you to our communion. We welcome you to this fellowship with us, in the blessings of the gospel; and promise to treat you, with christian affection, to watch over you with tenderness, and to offer our prayers to the Great Head of the church, that he would incline you, to fulfil this solemn covenant.²

The printed manual concludes with a listing of names of all those who had subscribed to this covenant. When members saw their names in the manual they knew they were part of the story. The

grace of God which stands at the center of that covenant is still at work in our wilderness journeys, empowering us to live as children of God. By that grace we, too, can remember the story.

Endnotes

1. Joanna Adams, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2010, page 15.
2. *Manual for Members*, Second Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois, 1842, pages 7-8.