

*The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. (Gen. 7:12)*

*Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Exod. 24:18-25:1)*

*Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart. (Deut. 8:2)*

*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. (Lk. 4:1-2)*

It's pretty clear that 40 is a very oft-used number for important events in the Bible. Forty is a symbolic number meaning "a long time." It is mentioned 146 times in the Old and New Testaments. There are also passages about 40 cubits and 40 children and various other 40s. But you know what isn't in the Bible? The 40 days of Lent. Lent is a church tradition, of course, and not a Biblical event. I think we can easily understand why the Church Fathers designated that Lent would be forty days long – to recall to our minds the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness; forty days. A very long time.

And the Israelites spent a very long time in the wilderness in their journey to the promised land. Forty is an easy number to remember and remembrance is what it is all about. Moses is getting to the end of his very long life in our passage from Deuteronomy. The people are instructed what to do after they have arrived in the promised land. They are to remember and give thanks for what God has done for them.

Remember that your ancestor was a wandering Aramean. Remember that you became enslaved by the Egyptians. Remember that God brought you out of Egypt and after 40 years you came into the place that God gave you, a land of milk and honey. Palestine was a land rich in resources, water, good soil for growing grain and feeding flocks and herds, strong trees of cedar, oak and cypress. Remember what God has done for you.

Moses goes on to say that the people are to give back to God as an offering, the first fruits of the land. Take note too that the people are to celebrate with the Levites, that is the priestly family, and also with the aliens, or strangers who live with the people. Everyone, no matter what their beliefs is invited to the celebration.

This so much reminds me of our Eucharist that we celebrate each week together. The Eucharistic prayer language has these same elements of remembering what God has done for us and bringing to God the gifts that have so generously been given to us; wheat and grapes, the fruits of our labors and our very selves as a living offering.

Have a look at the Eucharistic prayer, the great Thanksgiving, that we are using today. You may have noticed that in the last year or two we have been not only using Eucharistic prayers A, B, C and occasionally D from the Book of Common Prayer, but we are also using prayers from a trial use document called Enriching our Worship. Today we have Prayer 2 from Enriching our Worship. We also are interspersing, every sixth Sunday, the Rite I Eucharistic prayer. At the last General Convention of the Episcopal Church it was decided that rather than focus on Prayer Book revision (that would involve a lot of arguing) that we would enter a time of freer usage when parishes are allowed to vary their prayers.

Every communion prayer shares certain elements which, as we can now see, date back to the time of Moses about, so over 3000 years ago. Perhaps, a useful Lenten exercise would be to pay attention to the Eucharistic prayer of the week and see if you can spot all the traditional elements.

In the first part of the prayer, we recall God's creation of all the earth. We remember that we were created in God's image but that we are very imperfect creatures. We remember that God sent prophets to call us back to the love of God and each other.

And then, when the time was right, God sent Jesus to us. Mary is remembered as the mother of Jesus in our more modern prayers. Newer Eucharistic prayers also tell what Jesus did during his life. And we remember the sacrifice of Jesus and his last supper with his disciples. The wheat and grapes that we have harvested, we make into the bread and wine. Through God's blessing, the invoking of the Holy Spirit and our prayers, these elements become for us the body and blood of Jesus.

We Episcopalians decline to state how and in what way Jesus is present in the Eucharist. We just know that Christ is there. We use the term Real Presence. In this way we don't get into the minutiae of the ancient doctrines of transubstantiation or consubstantiation. (ask me later if you really want to get into the weeds on this.) It is up to each individual to have a spiritual understanding for themselves of what it means that Jesus is really present in this Holy Meal.

If it is not laid out for us in doctrine what we must believe, does that make it too easy to believe nothing? Maybe it does. But just maybe, if we are faithful enough to be here seeking Jesus, listening, praying and sharing a spiritually holy meal, we can trust each other enough to work it out for ourselves.

That's what Paul is saying in his letter to the Philippians; *"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; (Phil. 2:12)* Paul also says to us this morning in his letter to the Romans, *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.* Paul does not say that you have to believe in certain theological details. We will be saved...meaning that God gives us serenity and peace in life because we have faith that sin and death cannot overcome us. We are healed by God in the Spirit of Christ.

Luke narrates for us today about the events that took place just following the baptism of Jesus. It begins and ends with the Spirit:

*“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit,”* our passage begins. And the verse I added at the end was: *“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. (Verse 4:14)*

The whole event is bookended with the presence of the Spirit. The whole of the Eucharist is Spirit filled meal. How does the prayer begin? I pray that the Lord’s Spirit be with you, and you respond that the Spirit be with me. And the prayer ends with...in the Unity of the Holy Spirit to God be honor, glory and praise for ever and ever. That’s how WE remember.

Amen.