

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ First Sunday in Lent ✠
February 25, 2007

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. ⁸ So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰ and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.” Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him.”

(Deuteronomy 26:5-10)

Contestants on the TV show “The Amazing Race” travel around the world searching for clues and performing tasks all in an effort to be the first team to the finish line. But they don’t do it all in a day. At the end of every episode, they come to a pit stop, a place where they will rest and prepare for the next day’s adventure.

We are also on a journey. This journey does not take us to exotic locations across the world. It is a journey with Jesus that leads to his cross. We’re not competing to be first; our journey will end after 40 days when Good Friday comes and Jesus goes up, carrying his cross alone. But as we make this journey, we also have stopping places—called the Sundays in Lent. The Sundays in Lent are not included in the 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. These Sundays are our opportunity to rest along the way, shake off our dusty sandals, put aside our sackcloth and ashes and listen to our God for a few moments.

And what does he want to say to us today? Historically, the 1st Sunday in Lent is called *Invo-cavit*, which is the latin for the beginning of verses from Psalm 91 that were traditionally used today: **“He will call upon me and I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.”** That’s what he wants to say to us today: “Call upon me” like in Psalm 50: **“Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you and you will honor me.”** That’s really the lesson God through Moses was teaching the people of Israel in our Old Testament lesson today. CALL UPON ME in trouble and temptation. Call upon me for deliverance. And call upon me with honor and thanksgiving.

This part of the book of Deuteronomy has Moses’ instructions for the people of Israel on what they were to do when they came into the promised land, the land of Canaan. If you wanted to summarize Moses’ message in Deuteronomy, you could probably do it with one word: remember. Don’t forget how the Lord brought you where you are today. Remember the Lord; how he delivered you and cared for you.

One of the ways they could do that is here in chapter 26. Moses instructed them, when you get to the land, take some of your firstfruits, put them in a basket and bring the basket before the altar of the Lord. And our text for today is what the Israelites were to say. Basically, they were to recite the history of Israel, how God brought them out of Egypt and brought them to the land. Why? So they would remember. God wanted them to remember how Jacob started out as a

wandering Aramean. Jacob's journey did not start off well. He had to flee his home on the run from his angry brother Esau. When he came back home twenty years later he was chased by his angry father-in-law Laban. Later in his life he went to Egypt because of a famine that threatened the lives of his family. Generations later the Egyptians began to mistreat the Israelites. They became slaves. But, the story goes on, **"Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression."** What's the lesson here? What did God want his people to remember? How about: "When you were in trouble, you called to the Lord and I heard you. Call upon me in the day of trouble."

Now, there is some history here that we should probably keep in mind. Do you remember what the Israelites' first instinct was when they came into trouble and trial after they left Egypt? God finally dealt such blow to Pharaoh that he commanded the Israelites to leave Egypt. Of course, Pharaoh stubbornly changed his mind one more time and started chasing the Israelites. As they saw Pharaoh's army quickly coming their way, they realized that they were in deep trouble. But did they call out to the Lord? Well, yes, but this is what they said: **"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out into the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?...It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert."**

As it turns out, the Israelites' trouble wasn't Pharaoh or his army. It was them. It was their rebellion against God and their refusal to call upon him in trouble and temptation. In fact, they preferred to take sides with the people that were coming to kill them.

Can't you just hear the voice of your God reminding you at this stopping point in Lent, "Call upon me in trouble and temptation."

And so my mind races through my list of troubles. At work, my boss wants this from me and the clients are demanding something else. The work is too slow or the work is overwhelming. At home, the kids are three handfuls and I only have two. Or Mom and Dad just won't get off my back. The tax man is going to have bad news and I'm afraid the doctor will have worse news. Oh, yes, I've got lots of trouble and I'd think about talking to God about it but what good will it do?

And temptation – well, I don't exactly handle temptation like Jesus did. Instead of calling upon the Lord, we're much more likely to just stay quiet and hope no one notices what we have done or what we are doing. Instead of fleeing temptation, we hang around awhile, maybe walk away slowing, occasionally looking back over our shoulder and secretly wishing we were back in Egypt. You see, our biggest trouble is not the things that are coming at us or happen to us. It is us. It is our sinful nature that rebels against God and refuses to call upon him in our greatest need.

The Lord should have destroyed Israel for its rebellion and he ought to destroy us. But he delivered Israel despite its grumbling, rebellion, doubt, and sin. He should have left them in the desert to die. He should have handed them back to Pharaoh saying, "Here, you can have them. They don't want me so much. I don't want or need them." But that's not what he says.

"the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders." The Lord delivered his people. He delivered his people through the plagues, with miracles such as the parting of the red sea. He cared for them in the desert miraculously providing manna and quail.

But notice that this memorial summary of their history doesn't mention anything about Israel's wickedness and rebellion. Nothing. Above all else, what does God want them to remember in this new land? His deliverance. His grace. His mercy.

How do we describe, summarize the deliverance the Lord has won for us? Don't we say "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." That was our deliverance. Even though Jesus soundly shut down Satan's temptations; even though he never once stepped aside from the path of perfection. Jesus Christ receive the sentence of a criminal; he was arrested and suffered like a weak man; he died like one who had been defeated. But that was the Lord's mighty hand working your deliverance; mightier than the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Sea and more devastating than the worst of the plagues.

That's what the Lord wants you and me to remember during this Lenten season: Call upon me. I will deliver you. In fact, I *have* delivered you. That's why we walk this path every year, to see how Jesus won our deliverance, from his battle in the wilderness to his final triumph on the cross.

But there's one more thing that the Lord would have us remember. Moses reminded the people of Israel that when they were living in their new land, remember to bring a basket of first fruits to the Lord's altar. It was a chance for them to take inventory of the blessings God had showered upon them. And upon evaluation of those gifts, they would have to exclaim, "What great gifts! What bountiful blessings! Not only did the Lord deliver us from slavery in Egypt and take care of us every step of the way until he brought us here. Now he has increased our flocks and blessed our crops. This is a land flowing with milk and honey! What great gifts the Lord has given to me!"

What bounty you have received from the Lord's hand! His perfection! There in the wilderness as he defeated Satan and his lies and tricks. That perfection is yours. When he crushed Satan's head by his death on the cross. He did that for you. Do you remember how he delivered you through water – not the Red Sea, the water of your baptism – how he swept away your enemy in that mighty flood that trickled down your head so long ago? Do you remember how he fed you with food more miraculous than manna and quail? The very body and blood that he used to accomplish your deliverance! Given for you! Shed for you! Now do you see that *everything* you have comes from the God who created you and preserves you, who redeemed you and delivered you, called you and sanctified you?

Now how could we possibly decide what to place in this basket of first fruits that we bring before the almighty? What could we put there? The fact is that we have nothing to put in that basket except the things that he has given to us. What are my first fruits, the most valuable of his gifts to me? Maybe it's my treasures, my wealth – the fruits of my labor. Okay, but I've been given so much more. And what is that to the God who owns all things? So maybe I'll give of my time, the time that he has so graciously given to me. Sure. But what is my time to the eternal, everlasting God? The truth is that God doesn't really need my money or my time any more than he needed fruit from the land of Canaan. But he does say to us, "Call upon me. I will deliver you and you will honor me." When we have seen our Lord's deliverance in our greatest trouble, we will glad to come before him our firstfruits. What shall give give him? I know, I'll give him myself. I'll offer everything that I am as a living sacrifice to him for he gave himself for me. That's what I'll bring.. **"Now, O Lord, I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me."**

"Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you and you will honor me." That is God's promise, and a good reminder – at this stopping place, this Sunday in Lent – and for every stopping place in our life. At every opportunity we have to listen to the words of our God we remember to call to him in our time of trouble and temptation – which is our whole lives in the world of sin. But we remember that by his perfect obedience, his death and resurrection he delivered us from sin, and graciously gives us all gifts. May this reminder preserve you in faith this Lenten season and until our journey ends at our final stopping place, our home in heaven.