

**The First Sunday in Lent**  
**February (24 &) 25, 2007**  
**Homily by The Rev Timothy A Leitzke**

Religious practice, for me as a child, was probably best described as superstition. Pray, do the right things and the right times, keep God happy, and God will care for you and keep bad things from happening. I kind of outgrew that, but would slip back into that way of thinking when something important happened, something like a Detroit Red Wings Stanley Cup playoff game. There was a ritual for game day. It started in the afternoon when my brother, Nick, played his NHL video game as Detroit against whatever team Detroit was facing that night. I wasn't allowed to be there—it would render the game impure. Then, in the half hour leading up to the face off, I had to play Iron Maiden's *Real Live One*, stopping after "Bring Your Daughter to the Slaughter" so that I could hear Nick playing the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, culminating in the song "Carry That Weight." Then Nick clicked over to *The Hunt for Red October* soundtrack and played the theme song in honor of the five Russians who played for Detroit. The game started, and every player on the Detroit roster had an assigned theme song, catchphrase, or nickname, that had to be sung or said every time his name was mentioned. For every Detroit goal we had to sing the chorus of "Carry That Weight". This ritual held up for two years—if we did everything correctly, Detroit won. Detroit only lost if we missed a step. Then, in 1999, it just stopped working and we lost to Colorado in six games. Our religious observance lost its efficacy.

We just can't help ourselves. We have these liturgical superstitions. We have to bow to the cross when we acolyte or else the fire on the candles won't count. We have to kneel after receiving communion or it won't count. We have to come to worship, and we have to feel like something happened, or the rite is ineffective. We have to pray and light a candle and be anointed at the healing service or else illness will take us or our loved ones. These actions that I am describing are not intrinsically foolish or wrong. I kneel and cross myself and light candles and chant. These actions become foolish and superstitious when we think that they are a show for God. Liturgical superstition is the belief that our behavior will earn compensation from God.

We're using a new liturgy this Sunday. It is hardly the first time that we've had a new liturgy. The reading from Deuteronomy (26:1-11) describes a new liturgy for the people of Israel, thousands of years ago. There were new practices for Israel now that they were settling Canaan. Deuteronomy plots out the whole worship service. Turn to chapter 26 and follow the instructions for preparation. Your lines are provided for you and the actions that the priest shall take are described for you, as are instructions for what you should do after your speaking part has ended. No doubt some saw this practice as something done to earn compensation from God. That's not the purpose of this liturgy, though.

Let's listen carefully to what the participants say.

*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.* Jacob, the traditional ancestor and namesake of God's people, was an expatriate, a vagabond, a slimy, double-

crossing jerk. Worshippers using this setting open their liturgy by claiming him and his shady past as their own.

*He went down into Egypt...he became a great nation...the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us.* Even though Israel had grown huge they were powerless at the hands of the Egyptians. Not only were they descendants of a conniving coward, they were weaklings.

*The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.* God answered their cries for help. God came over to Egypt and broke them out of slavery. God freed them.

*He brought us to this place and gave us this land.* The conquest of Canaan was God's doing. The land and its produce were gifts from God.

The whole liturgy says, "We are nothing; God is everything, and God gives us everything.

*So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.* This is a liturgy of thanksgiving. It is not done to court God's favor or earn compensation. It is done to thank God. It reveals nothing to God that God didn't already know. It reveals to us the simple truth: We are nothing; God is everything, and God gives us everything.

Our new liturgy is also a liturgy of thanksgiving. The word 'Eucharist' is Greek for 'thanksgiving', and Eucharist is one of our many names for Holy Communion. Heck, part of the liturgy, a call and response between pastor and

people, is called The Great Thanksgiving. In Holy Communion, we give our words, our songs, our money, and ourselves in thanksgiving. We do not do it to court God's favor or earn compensation. We do it to thank God.

Our liturgy starts with us on our knees, confessing our wretched origins. It continues with a plea for mercy. It builds through a proclamation of God's love for us and forgiveness of our Sin, and culminates in Jesus the Christ giving us his body and blood. It reveals nothing to God that God did not already know. It reveals to us the simple truth: We are nothing; God is everything, and God gives us everything.

That's not the end of the liturgy. There are instructions regarding what we should do. In Deuteronomy they are, "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house." Share your gifts. The Levites are the priests—sharing with them is easy enough in theory to do. The one that's got to hit home is the command to eat with the aliens who reside among you. They're here, even if usually invisible. On Thursday my wife treated me to a hockey game at Madison Square Garden. I did not perform my complex pre-game ritual. We rode the train into the city, and shared the car with many aliens. We were on the train to avoid driving and parking; they were on the train because they had no automobiles. It wasn't long before the train was packed. The dominant language in the car was Spanish. I quickly went from sharing with aliens to being so surrounded by them that *I* was the alien.

The liturgy, be it Deuteronomy 26 or *ELW* Setting Nine, calls me to share with them, to give them some of what I have and to join them in celebrating God's gifts. The liturgy has reminded me of what I know to be true: I am nothing; God is everything, and everything that I have I have by the grace of God. The only thing separating me from my fellow aliens on the train to New York was luck. God has treated us well. God continues to treat us well. We don't share with the aliens in our midst and celebrate with them in the hope that God will notice and treat us well. We share with the aliens in our midst in thanksgiving to God. God loves all of creation, and God provides for everyone. We share with the aliens in our midst so that God's will, of blessing for everyone, may be done. Friends of Christ, be a blessing to the aliens in your midst. Give thanks to God by giving others a reason to be thankful. God loved us when we were in bondage to Sin, and gave us Jesus the Christ to forgive our Sin. Share that blessing. Amen