

Date: February 14, 2016
 Scriptures: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Deuteronomy 26:1-11
 Title: The Story We Tell

While we were in Portland,
 George and I went to see Revenant,
 which was nominated for 12 Academy Awards.

We saw it on a big screen,
 and the photography was in a word, "Wow!"

The story takes place in Missouri Territory
 in the dead of winter.

The landscape is pristine and beautiful.

Blue skies,
 soaring mountains,
 snow glistening like diamonds
 as the sun hits it,
 dense forests,
 clean flowing rivers
 and broad roaring cascades.

The beauty of the landscape belies
 a ferocious savagery that can appear suddenly
 and just as suddenly destroy everything in its path.

This ferocious beauty also suggests
 something about the people who live there.

Many of them have one goal and one goal only,
 to survive regardless of the cost.

Survival at any cost leads them
 to do horrendous things.

When combined with greed, fear, revenge,
 the horror increases exponentially.

There are people, Americans and Native Americans,
 who abide by a code of ethics -
 commitment to family and community,
 compassion for another human being,
 zeal for justice.

Yet, we, today, would consider
 what many of them do in that place and time
 as nothing less than savage.

We are a long way from that time and place.

The Israelites have also come a long way.
 Forty years of wandering in the wilderness to be exact.
 They are sitting on a hill
 overlooking the Promised Land.
 Moses is instructing them how to live
 before they go into the land
 God has given them.
 What he tells them comes
 from God's own lips on Mt. Sinai.
 He instructs them to do three things ~
 show gratitude,
 remember what God has done for them,
 provide for the marginalized.

Gratitude is the recognition of unearned gifts of love
 that arises from a place of humility.
 For gratitude to be more than an emotional response,
 it must be expressed.
 It must be lived out in the world.
 Understanding this, Moses instructs the people to
 "take some of the fruit of the ground
 to the place of worship
 and give it to the priest."
 Interestingly, Moses speaks of the first fruit,
 not the middle fruit or the last fruit.
 He wants the people to realize
 that their offering to God needs to be made
 before they do anything else
 with their resources,
 and he makes no mention
 of an exemption when there is a poor harvest.
 Whether, we have much or little,
 we are to give a portion to God.
 When we do,
 it is both an act of gratitude and
 and an expression of trust
 that God will provide.

Because remembrance births gratitude,
 Moses enjoins the people to remember that
 their ancestor, Abraham, was once homeless

and from this homeless man
 God brought forth a people.

Remember that
 they were once slaves in Egypt
 harshly treated and afflicted.

Remember that
 God brought them
 out of the land of their imprisonment
 and gave them a land of milk and honey.

Remember that
 they “ . . . have basked in the faithfulness of God.”

(W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. Preaching This Week).

In addition to birthing gratitude,
 remembrance also shapes the character of the people,
 shapes the values by which they live.

Understanding that remembrance and gratitude
 give rise to the values of compassion and hospitality.

Moses tells his people
 to celebrate God's bounty
 with the Levites and the aliens
 after they offer their first fruit.

Their offering becomes the food
 of people dependent on their generosity.

This text specifically mentions the Levites and aliens.

The Levites,
 one of the 12 tribes of Israel,
 were set apart to serve as priests.

In order to fulfill their responsibility
 to care for God's people,
 they were relieved of the necessity
 of earning a living by the sweat of their brow
 or the work of their hands.

Instead, their support was to come from the other 11 tribes.

But, people being people,
 that support could be unpredictable.

Aliens are very different from Levites.

Yet, they have one thing in common with them.

Their lives are frequently tenuous.

Before the Israelites go down from the mountain top
 into the Promised Land,

Moses tells the people

that having received grace upon grace from God,
 they are to be generous and hospitable
 to the littlest and the least living among them
 to the Levites, the aliens, the widows and orphans.

Gratitude, remembrance, hospitality,
 three values which, when embraced,
 allow people to experience joy and peace.
 The same is true today.

You and I are blessed to be living
 in a land of milk and honey,
 a promised land.

Others, who went before us,
 have brought us to this place and this time.

We enjoy what we have,
 because of the countless nameless, faceless people,
 who preceded us.

Yet, peace and joy seem to elude
 both our nation and many of its people.

Fear and anxiety are palpable.
 People are angry.

There is an ever-widening gap
 between the have's and have not's.

And the art of negotiation and civil discourse
 seem to have vanished.

The malaise our country is experiencing
 has reached a crescendo in this election year.

Responding to the widespread dissatisfaction,
 many of the candidates' speeches are
 venomous and divisive.

Few make any mention
 of gratitude or remembrance or hospitality.

I wonder what would happen
 if the candidates were
 to take a play out of God's game plan.

If the candidates were to talk
 about our nation's wealth of resources
 and our responsibility to steward them.

If they were to remember and talk

about the principles on which our nation was founded
 and the people, who labored to birth it
 and the multitude, who came to our shores
 and through their living and dying
 helped it become great.

If they were to acknowledge
 that at our best we have been a nation,
 which allowed the highest ethical principles to guide us.

What would our nation look like
 if the current political discourse
 were to start there?

Who would we become as a people?
 How might such conversations influence
 our individual and collective joy and peace?

Last week Michelle posted
 a story about Nico on Facebook.
 She had gone to pick him up from daycare.
 It was 5pm,
 time to be heading home.

But before he left, he had to give
 one of his classmates one last hug.
 Then, everyone other classmate came up
 to give him a hug and say goodbye.

As Michelle said,
 "This was after spending eight hours together."

On the way out,
 Michelle picked up a copy of the Bible verse
 they had studied earlier in Chapel.

It was Matthew 6:25-34 which explains
 we should trust God to take care of us
 just as he takes care
 of the birds and the flowers.

Then, Before they walked out,
 Nico stopped to hug the folks in the office.

Nico won't vote for another sixteen years,
 which in some ways is too bad.
 He has already begun to incorporate
 gratitude and hospitality and a deep awareness
 that he is loved into his story.

Too bad his fullness, his joy and peace,
won't be counted this year.

Now, you and I only have to wait nine months
before we can vote.

Yet, we can begin today to allow
gratitude, remembrance of God's love, and hospitality
to shape our story.

Why not make this activity a Lenten practice?

Each day focus on
showing gratitude,
remembering God's love,
offering hospitality.

It only takes forty days to change a behavior.

Forty days of purposeful living.

How might these values define us
both as individuals and a community?

What might our story be
if we allowed God's promise and possibility
rather than the pettiness of politicians
to shape us?

Might we experience unexpected joy and peace?

We will never know unless we choose and remember
to live in the Promised Land.

Amen.