

Sermon: The Word is Near You

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 9, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My mother is a wonderful story-teller. She never seemed to get tired of telling or retelling stories, of years past, and she never seemed to run out of stories to tell. I still have fond memory of piling onto my parents' bed, when my sister and I were little, listening to Mom recounting her stories.

I recall the one about how Dad had evidently stalked her on his bicycle when they were only teenagers. At that time, Dad wasn't rich by any standard, but he had a grandma that spoiled him, and bought him a brand new, ten-speed bicycle, that made a distinctive clicking sound as it rolls. He would ride that bicycle, secretly following this dashing beautiful girl in the neighbourhood (Mom). He was way too shy to approach her, and was only able to gather enough courage to tail her at a distance while riding or walking his new bike.

Of course, Mom knew, or rather she heard. She didn't know exactly who was following her, but recognized the distinctive sound of that gearbox, over weeks and months, from what was a not-so-secret admirer. That was how they first got to know each other, and the rest is history. She did have to pay a steep price, later, for defying her parents in order to marry Dad, but that's another story all together.

We, my family, never seem to get tired of Mom's stories, for we understand our need to listen as much as her need to tell them. We know that these stories steady her, reinvigorate her and help her to remember who she was and is. In turn, these stories help us and remind us of who we are. I wonder, if you were to retell a story of your family, what would it be?

Moses is also a great story teller. The Book of Deuteronomy, or as I like to refer to it as the book of the "Second Law" (that's the literal translation of this combined word of 'deutero' and 'nomo'), and this book really should be read as Moses retelling the story of God covenanting with the Israelites, the people of God.

In our reading this morning of chapter 26, Moses is urging the Israelites to remember, starting in verse 5, God's goodness through the story of their ancestry, "*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went*

down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.”

The Arameans were indeed wanderers, who were attested as early as the fourteen century BC, on the west bend of the Euphrates River. They then sojourned to the present day Syria, to the west and south and settled there. A number of Abraham’s kins settled in that region, including his father Terah, brother Nahor, and nephew Bethuel. Wives of Isaac and Jacob came also from this region, this Aramaic branch of the family. So this verse seems justifiable, to assert the origin of Israel as Arameans.

The wanderlust of Abraham continued with his descendants, particularly Jacob who was later renamed Israel, and his twelve sons who eventually sojourned to Egypt, Joseph being the first, and followed by the rest, and settled there where they became numerous.

Moses then recounted the salvation history of Israel, how they were oppressed by the Egyptians, how the Lord God, upon hearing the cries of the people, brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders, and brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The stories that Mom tells of our family were not all gentle. Mom and Dad had a really rocky relationship, fighting all the time, intermingled with threats of divorce, suicide, and episodes of domestic violence. In those days, Dad was really not a nice guy. Compounding the problem was the birth of my older brother, born with severe physical deformities. Caring for him became almost a full-time job for Mom. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, made a huge difference, absolving Mom of her internal guilt of bearing a handicapped child, though caring for him day-by-day was still challenging.

In one particular story Mom recounted, of her standing by the river bank of Tiam Shui, a river that flows through the northern part of Taipei, while holding my older brother in her arms, ready to give up the fight, ready to walk into the frigid water, into their death. As the water began to overtake them, my brother bursted out a word ‘Yah-Shu’, that is the name of Jesus in Taiwanese. Though he was not able to speak much nor clearly throughout all his life, at that moment of near death, he cried out to ‘Yah-Shu’, to Jesus. That cry turned my mother’s heart, as she repented and returned to the shore to embrace life, in all its challenges, once again.

That's the story of how faith in Jesus, in the most concrete and dramatic way, saved my family. As later, Mom, my brother, Dad and my sister and myself, were all baptized into the Christian faith, and began to serve the Lord even to this day.

The point of Moses recounting the salvation history of Israel was to remind the people not to forget God's goodness and graciousness, and to give thanks in the most concrete form of bringing the first of the fruit of the ground that the Lord has given to them, back to the Lord God. Through an offering of thanksgiving, along with Levites and aliens, that is other sojourners and fellow wanderers who happened to be living in the land besides them. And together, they shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord God has given to them.

Here is a theological truth we can profess: faith in God is directly tied to our remembering of what God has done, and it is expressed in the act of giving thanks by bringing to God, the first and the best, of what God has already given to us. I wonder, if you were to recount the salvation history of your family, how would you tell it?

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart", as the Apostle Paul reminds the church that is gathered in Rome, in Romans 10:8. He wasn't just quoting Deuteronomy 30:14, Paul was retelling the story that Moses once did long ago.

In that story, Moses reminded the Israelites that the Law of God is preceded by the grace of God, and in fact the commandments that Moses is passing on, shortened to a collective phrase—the word—is not too far and not too hard. No one needs to climb up to heaven to get it, nor to cross the sea to hear it. The word of God is in fact very near, in your mouth and in your heart.

Paul takes another step further. The 'word' he is talking about is not the words we read in the Scriptures, nor the words we hear in the commandments, Paul is referring to Jesus Christ, as the 'living word' that draws near to us, that resides in our hearts. For all who confess Jesus with our mouth, and believe with our hearts will never be put to shame, in fact they will be saved.

Here is the key part, in verse 12, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek", as there is no distinction between Israelites and aliens, between long-time churchgoers or first-time seekers; "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him."

Allow me to conclude my sharing with this story of once again my family. I was very apprehensive about a conversation that I was about to have with Mom and Dad. I had responded to God's call to pastoral ministry, finished seminary study, and accepted the call to the pastoral charge of my parents' church in Montreal, my home church sort of speak. I had become de facto their pastor.

Not long into that ministry, I learned about the disposition of one of my parents' properties in Taiwan, resulting in a substantial windfall. As their son, I knew of Dad's frugality borderline stinginess. As their pastor, I wanted to encourage them to tithe, to fulfill the requirement of the commandment. As you can see, it was not an easy conversation to approach.

However, just as I began to explain the nature of that conversation, Mom interjected, and assured me that I have no need to be concerned, as a son or as a pastor. Apparently, Mom and Dad already had that conversation, and had come to an agreement and a plan to donate to various congregations, to support financially a number of seminary students and a number of pastors.

They have not forgotten about the tithing requirement, they have not forgotten about God's goodness and graciousness, in saving our family and blessing us in immeasurable ways. Most importantly, as Mom puts it, they have already given to God the most important first fruit, that is their one remaining son (referring to me) to do God's work, for which they are absolutely proud of.

The Word is indeed near. It is for you, and your family, and all who sojourn in your midst. For everyone who calls on the name of Jesus, shall be blessed and saved. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**