

Text: Deuteronomy 26:5-10. First Sunday in Lent. **February 14, 2016.**

Grace and peace are yours through our suffering Savior, Jesus. Amen.

How often do you see someone bowing down? Maybe you think of the Japanese custom of bowing, like a handshake. But that's kind of quick and only at the waist. How often do you see someone on their knees? Maybe an old school marriage proposal. Today would be a good day for one of those, wouldn't it? What about someone who goes to the next level of bowing down, all the way, flat on the floor, face in the dirt? Don't see that very often, do you? This flat on the floor, face in the dirt idea is the basic meaning behind the words, "Bow down," we read in Deuteronomy. If it's in the Bible, why don't we do it? Well, it's unhygienic, lying in the dirt. It's uncomfortable. Do you know how hard it is to get up? I'm not as young as I used to be. But deeper than that, flat on the floor, face in the dirt, is vulnerable. Someone else could take advantage of me. I couldn't defend myself. Especially in prayer, I would have to admit just how low I am before God. That's tough to do. I don't like to think that I'm flat on the floor, helpless, face in the dirt, vulnerable, before God. I'm not saying that you must lie on the ground when you pray. And that we are starting a new custom today in church and take out the chairs so everyone has room to be face on the ground. But maybe we need more of that attitude that bows before the LORD. Maybe we need more of the vulnerability before God. Maybe we need to admit that I'm helpless, and everything good in my life comes only from God and I deserve none of it. If we don't bow down with our bodies, we still need to bow down with our hearts. Bow down to the LORD your God. Bow down to the LORD your God.

We take our cue in bowing down from this part of Deuteronomy. The bowing down starts with a confession. My father was a wandering Aramean and he went down into Egypt. Even if you don't know what this means, I think you can tell it sounds kind of insulting. It's like trash talk you would say of someone else, "You wandering Aramean," rather than something you would say about yourself.

And the words are actually worse than they appear. They were a deep confession of dire sinfulness. The father was their ancestor Jacob. Jacob means deceiver. Sorry for those named Jacob, that's just what it means. Jacob deceived his father, tricked his brother and had to run for his life, to another country, Aram, hence the title Aramean. While in Aram, he starts working for his uncle and the tables are turned. Jacob's uncle, Laban, deceives Jacob. Jacob gets fed up and runs for his life, again. Then Jacob's land is stricken with famine and he has to go to Egypt, with just the few people who comprised his sons and their families. He was always kind of one step ahead of death. The word wandering more often is translated, "dying," or, "perishing." It's not a nice thing to call yourself.

Would we say the same thing about ourselves, wandering, dying, perishing, just one step ahead of death? Well, that's what we are. The wages of sin is death. We are deserving of death. Think of all the false gods we have bowed down to: the god of busy. Our family is so busy, we don't have time to talk about God's Word. I'm so busy, I don't have time to... It's a miracle that we are one step ahead of death. We should be dead already, if God were to be fair. We should all already be in hell, myself first in line, if God would treat us as our sins deserve, if God were to treat us as our wandering, perishing, sinful conditions have earned.

But God does not treat us as our sins deserve. God didn't make us pay the wages for our sin. God let Jesus pay those wages in our place with his perfect death. You see, Jesus didn't bow down to the devil. Jesus was perfect. In our place. For all the kingdoms of all the world, Jesus didn't bow down, because

Jesus wanted you in his kingdom, more than he wanted anything else. He wanted you to be by his side, more than all the riches of earth, more even than he wanted to eat, he wanted you. So he lived for you. He died for you. He rose for you, so you will rise. He rose so you are not a wandering, perishing Aramean, but a loved and blessed Christian, a child of God, one who isn't afraid to bow down before the LORD your God, because everything good comes from the LORD your God.

As we look at the rest of this part of the Bible, we are really going to see a back and forth between good and bad. That back and forth really describes our Christian life today doesn't it? We do something bad. God does something better with his forgiveness. The LORD gives us a blessing, free and undeserved, the devil tries to turn that blessing into a curse so we forget the LORD and don't bow down to him.

The nation of Israel, the descendants of that deceiver Jacob, finally had it made. They had their own place, a rich part of Egypt called Goshen. They could raise their flocks, care for their families and live the good life. The LORD blessed them and they grew in number. Happily ever after, right? Wrong. The devil turned this prosperity into a curse. The Egyptians turned against them. The Egyptians saw their prosperity and their growing numbers and they were afraid. "They are going to turn against us! They will side with our enemies!" The Egyptians turned this entire nation into slaves. For four hundred years! They mistreated God's people (but God only allowed it for a time). They oppressed them, made them suffer, made them endure harsh labor. Misery, toil, oppression. And this went on for hundreds of years! How many generations only knew slavery? How many generations had to doubt what seemed to be fairy tale promises, "We are God's people! God will take us to the promised land!" Tall tales for people who couldn't face reality.

Until the LORD stepped in, with pity and with power. He heard the cries of his people. He took pity on them. He exercised his power. At his right time, he rescued them. It's a cool picture isn't it? A mighty hand and an outstretched arm. The LORD himself reached right out and rescued his people. His own hand delivered them. His mighty arm rescued them. He did signs and wonders. Turned the precious Nile River to blood. Sent flies and frogs and hail and darkness and boils, all to prove, "I am the LORD," all to show, "the gods of the Egyptians are nothing." The Egyptians were terrified. The people of God believed and were rescued.

But these signs were only tokens of better things to come. If God could do so much in power, how much more would he do in love? If God's mighty hand and outstretched arm can perform such signs in judgment, how much more will his mighty hand and outstretched arm perform in rescue? Well, he did rescue. He split a sea in half, led his people through on dry ground, guided them for forty years in a barren wilderness and led them to the land he promised, the land flowing with milk and honey. Milk and honey by the way are signs of prosperity. You have to have animals to get milk. Those animals have to be having babies to give milk and they have to give enough milk for their babies and for you. So if you have milk, you have animals, more animals, and healthy animals. Honey was a sweet delicacy, a real treat. And in this land, the hills dripped with milk, the honey like flowed down the hillsides there was so much. This wasn't slavery in Egypt. This was God's own good land. This was the promised land. How could the people not bow down and worship? How could they stay standing upright? After all the signs and miracles and blessings and riches?

I know that's a lot of history. I know that's a lot about them. What does it matter for me? I pray that as we reviewed this history, you saw the truth of what the Bible says, "there is nothing new under the sun." We are sinners, deserve nothing good from God. But God has rescued us from sin. God showers so

many blessings on us and the devil is so quick to turn them into curses. We prayed and we cried and we begged for children. God finally gave us one, then another, maybe a third or fourth. Holding the baby, those are the happiest pictures you will ever see. Then those kids stay up at night. We're too tired to keep reading our Bible and don't have the energy to read devotions with them. They cry so much during church it's not worth it to go anymore, so we sinfully think. Then one day, God rescues us from this thinking. One of those children asks on the way home, "What's an Aramean?" He was listening! She was paying attention. It does matter! Praise God. I want to bow down right in the car! You go to school, for a really long time. Get the good job you always wanted. You are ready to live the good life, thanking God every day. "Not so fast," the devil says. This work is hard. The hours are long. The schedule unpredictable. You can't give up your one morning a week to sleep in. And it wasn't really God who gave you this job. You worked. You studied. You deserve it. And this great blessing becomes the greatest curse. Then God steps in. A friend tells you, "My new job is a lot less pay. And I still work hard. But now I see how I'm serving the LORD." And God uses the words of that friend to rescue you from your slavery to work, and frees you to serve him.

The response? Do what God told the Israelites to do. Bring the firstfruits of the soil. So much we could talk about. The word for soil sounds like the name Adam, a reminder that as these fruits came from the soil God provided, so my very first ancestor came from the soil that God made. I'm nothing but dirt. Lying in the dirt once in a while to remind me who I am before God wouldn't be the worst idea. I'm going to bring the firstfruits. The first and the best. That's what God deserves. It all came from him anyway. That's what my love for God demands: the first, the best. God doesn't have to brow beat us with laws. Christ compels us with love. We love to worship. We love to bring God the best and first he's given us. We love to bow down.

Yes, we love to bow down. We can't help but bring offerings. Did you notice how worship of God and offerings go together? It's why we gather an offering as part of worship. There's never any guilt to bring an offering. There's love that compels us to worship and bow down and bring those offerings. The church doesn't just want your money. The church wants your soul to be in heaven. God wants your heart to be fully bowed down to him. We are still sincere when we say, "We don't expect you to give an offering." God will have to move your heart to do that. But for those who have seen God's mighty hand and outstretched arm, for those who have seen God rescue us from the dying slavery to sin, for those who have been brought to the promised land of faith, no offering is ever enough to show love, no basket is ever big enough, no posture is ever low enough. Bow down before him. Amen.