

## **From Family to Nation**

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

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**Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

### **Sermon**

“What’s the point of history?” Kids in school ask that question. Mostly because their history books are boring. But it’s a good question anyway.

“What’s the point of history?” According to George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” So remembering history can save us from making the same mistakes again. Henry Ford didn’t agree with that. He thought that remembering history trapped us in the past. So he said, “History is bunk.”

“What’s the point of history?” The Book of Deuteronomy has its own answer to that question. It says, “Remember the past to know who you are. Remember the past to know who you belong to.” That kind of remembering is important. That’s why the Book of Deuteronomy prepares Israel to remember things that haven’t even happened yet!

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Here’s the basic message in the Book of Deuteronomy. “When you’ve settled down in the land of Canaan and life is good, remember who made it happen. And remember why.”

DEUTERONOMY 26 IS LOOKING AHEAD. It’s looking beyond all the bloodshed that’s coming to a place of peace and prosperity. “When you have entered the land,” it says. “When you have settled down,” it says. “When you have your first harvest,” it says. It sounds like a dream, or like a mirage, a beautiful mirage.

Why not a mirage? Israel has been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Living on bread from heaven and water from the rock. Fighting against visible enemies and against their own worst impulses.

But now they’re on the border, almost home. And it’s important that they remember, that they remember who they are, that they remember how they got here, and that they remember why.

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Deuteronomy 26 helps them remember. “The Lord your God is bringing you to this place,” it says. “The Lord your God is giving you this land,” it says. “The Lord your

God is giving you this harvest," it says. "The Lord your God is dwelling in your midst," it says. So remember. Remember the Lord your God.

DEUTERONOMY 26 EVEN TELLS THEM HOW TO REMEMBER. It says, "When you've settled down in the land and when you have your first harvest, bring a basket of firstfruits and present it to the Lord your God." It says, "When you present your basket to the Lord your God, here's what you say." Then there's a script.

Now, some of you might think that prayer to the Lord has to be spontaneous, that it has to be Spirit-led, in the moment. But Deuteronomy 26 doesn't go in that direction. There's no room for an Israelite to just wing it. Not this time. This prayer is too important. It has to hit the right notes. It has to remember the story.

It's the story of Jacob and his family. How they settled in Egypt. And how they became slaves. How the Lord heard their prayers. How he set them free. And how he brought them to Canaan. That's the story to tell, because that's the story Israel needs to remember.

AND WHAT ARE THEY REMEMBERING? That the Lord God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham. And that they are inheriting the land because they are the children of Abraham.

Their story—and it's a long, difficult story, a story filled with twists and turns—but their story is a story about the Lord God. It's a story about his love and faithfulness. It's a story about the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham. He promised that Abraham would possess the land, that he would have a vast number of descendants, and finally that through him blessing would go out to every people on the earth.

So this story this isn't just about Israel. And this story isn't just about Abraham's family, his physical descendants. This story is actually about the whole world. Because God loves the whole world.

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Have you ever noticed in the stories about the Exodus and about Israel in the wilderness and about Israel finally in the land of Canaan—have you ever noticed in these stories that there are foreigners living with the Israelites? It's true. Because the Lord God is the God of all nations and all peoples. And his salvation is for the whole world.

NOW, WHEN WE START READING THAT *KINGDOMS* BOOK, we'll find out that things don't go so smoothly in the land of Canaan. We'll find out that Israel doesn't do such a

great job of remembering the Lord God. We'll find out that Israel winds up in exile, which is the same mess all the rest of us are in.

This means Israel's story needs a better ending than the one it gets at the end of *Kingdoms*. And, of course, the end of Israel's story— And when I say, "end," I don't mean the place where the story stops. No; I mean the place where the story is heading. I mean the place where the story finally reaches its goal. And that goal is Jesus. Because, in Jesus, everything God promises to Abraham is completed. And it's even bigger than Abraham or anyone had hoped.

ABRAHAM WILL BE THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS, because "at the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue [shall] acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Because the whole earth—a new heaven and a new earth, in fact—will be the inheritance of the children of God. And because, in Jesus, God will dwell among us.

And that's not all. Because, by the Spirit, the church is the Body of Christ, the "fullness of him who fills everything in every way." And the church, by the Spirit, is in the world and for the world. Because God loves the world so much that he gives the body of Christ, the church, to the world.

That's the story we know. That's the story we tell. That's the story we live by.

EACH OF US HAS OUR OWN STORY TO TELL. You do, and so do I. You have your testimony, about your conversion or about your grandmother and how she taught you to pray. All of that matters. And all of that is good.

But more important than your story or my story is our story, the church's story. That's the most important story for us to remember. Because it tells us who we are. And it tells us who we belong to. And it tells us what we are here for.

And this story is too important for us just to wing it. There are times to use a script, a script given by the Spirit through the church. So let's stand up and say it together. It's our story.

## **The Nicene Creed**

We believe in one God, the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,

God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made;  
of the same essence as the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven;  
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,  
and was made human.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried.

The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.

He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again with glory  
to judge the living and the dead.

His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life;  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified;  
who spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,  
and to life in the world to come.

Amen.

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Glory and thanks be to God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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