

The Rev. Dr. Stephen H. Applegate
 First Sunday in Lent – Year C
 St. Paul’s Episcopal Church
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From the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy: *Arami oveid avi*, or to say it in English: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” Deuteronomy 26:5

This is the First Sunday in Lent, only a few days after the start of this very solemn season in the church year. Today I want to talk about our identities. In other words, I want to think with you about the questions: Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?

These are questions each of us sorts out – not just once, but many times throughout our lives. And these are questions that parish churches sort out – especially when, like St. Paul’s, they are in the hunt for new clergy leadership.

A story from my own life to get us started. After I graduated from college, I took a job in Buffalo selling commercial property and casualty insurance. I had been hired by an alum I had met on a college choir tour the year before, in one of those chance encounters that sometimes set the pattern for the rest of one’s life.

One day in June, after my college graduation, I drove out of my parents’ driveway to start my adult life in what seemed to me to be the enormous city of Buffalo. I knew nobody, or at least I thought I knew nobody.

Not long after I arrived, I got a call from a college classmate of mine, Fred Holender. Fred and I had sung in the college choir and in the college *a cappella* group. Somehow, even though I had known him for four years, I had never made the connection that he was from Buffalo.

Fred returned home after graduation, was living with his parents and was, like me, starting his first job out of college. “Would I like to come to dinner?” he asked. You can imagine how quickly I said yes. From that first dinner until I left for seminary three years later, I was a frequent dinner guest at the Holenders’.

When spring arrived the following year after one of those *signature* Buffalo winters, Fred’s mother invited me to their Passover Seder. If you have ever been to a Passover Seder, you know the meal is served with a running commentary that tells the story of the Jewish people and their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The story is told to answer four questions that are traditionally asked by children, the *Mah nishtanah*. At the beginning of the Seder, a child asks:

Mah nishtanah ha-lailah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-laylot? Why is this night different from all the other nights?

On all other nights, we eat either leavened bread or matzah;
 why, on this night, only matzah?

On all other nights, we eat all kinds of herbs;
 why, on this night, do we especially eat bitter herbs?

On all other nights, we do not dip herbs at all;
why, on this night, do we dip them twice?

On all other nights, we eat in an ordinary manner;
why, tonight, do we dine with special ceremony?

The answers to these four questions tell the story of the people of Israel from God's call of Abraham through their deliverance at the Red Sea. The story is known as the Haggadah. Tradition says that four different kinds of children ask, "*Mah nishtanab?*": the four different kinds of children are wise children, scornful children, simple children, and children who don't think to ask questions.

Each child receives an answer based upon what kind of child they are. The wise child receives a thorough explanation of the observances of the Passover. The scornful child – because he asks the question from the standpoint of a person who does not feel a part of the Jewish people – receives an invitation rather than an answer: Join us tonight. Be with us, become part of us. Then you will know what the Seder means to us.

When the simple child questions, "*Mah zot*, what is this?" she receives this answer, "We are remembering a time long ago in another land when we were forced to work for other people as slaves. With a mighty arm Adonai our God made us a free people and we are celebrating our freedom."

And the child who doesn't even think to question is treated with patience and tenderness. She is told: "This wondrous evening happens in the spring of every year, so we may remember how out of death and sorrow and slavery come life and joy and freedom. To remember the sorrow we eat bitter herbs; to remember the joy we drink sweet wine."

After these questions are asked and answered, the telling of the story begins – the story that each generation is honor bound to tell to the succeeding generation – the Haggadah itself. Telling the story is a way of building identity within the Jewish community, a way, as the commentaries about the Haggadah tell us, to ***let each Jew feel as if he or she came forth out of Egypt***. Telling the story is a way for even a child to know the answer to the question: "who am I?"

At the core of the Haggadah is the passage we heard today from Deuteronomy:

"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. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me."

This recital of the story of the people of God in Deuteronomy originally accompanied a long-lost ritual – the ritual of bringing the first fruits to the priest. It is a vestige of the time when the Passover was connected to the celebration of the first fruits of the barley harvest and the birth of the first lamb of the flock. It is from a time when gratitude was expressed tangibly by tithing.

As one contemporary rabbi puts it, presenting the tithe of barley and the first lamb of the flock to the priest was like saying, “Here God. Who am I kidding? There’s no way I could have done this by myself. The first yield of my labors and my prayers belong to you.”

Now, reviewing all this background is a long way to get at what I want to explore with you today. And that is this: who are we? How do we define and describe ourselves? What is OUR identity? And then, how do we go about remembering who we are?

If I were to sit down next to you and ask you: “who are you?” you might give me a variety of responses depending on the context in which I was meeting you. This past week I listened to myself answer that question in a whole lot of different ways. “I’m the interim at St. Paul’s” I said to neighboring clergy as I was organizing the ecumenical Good Friday service. “I’m Terry’s husband,” I said with a smile to a couple whom we know well, but who probably wondered if Terry still had a husband since I hadn’t been seen with her in Granville for a couple of years. “I am dust and to dust I shall return” I said to myself as Rose Anne imposed ashes on my forehead at the noon Ash Wednesday service.

Most often when we are asked the question, “who are you?” we tell a story. We say where we’re from, where we went to school, what we do for a living. We talk about our parents or our kids, where we live now, what we like or don’t like.

As we grow to trust other people, we begin to talk about the experiences that have shaped us – our joys and sorrows. We go deeper.

Sometimes other people tell us who we are, or at least they try. Marketing firms do this all the time – and they are very sophisticated at it. I was born in 1952, and that puts me squarely in the middle of the Baby Boomers. My older children are Gen-Xer’s. My younger ones are Millennials – without all the negative stereotypes the Millennials are tagged with. That’s how the marketing people would begin to describe us.

Most of the time, it isn’t particularly dangerous to be defined by others – it’s just a nuisance. But one of the things that has happened in the last couple of years is how – at least in the political arena – how we have let others define us has led to the unfortunate division and polarization in our society.

And it certainly can happen that to have someone else say who we are can be extremely dangerous.

Among the disastrous examples are the stories of those who followed Jim Jones to Guiana and drank the Kool Aid, or those who signed on to Hitler’s definition of themselves as the superior race, or, more recently, what someone with a very big microphone told us we should believe about refugees, or migrants, or LGBTQ+ people, or the differently abled. If we let anyone tell us to believe hateful things about the marginalized, we put some of the children of God at serious risk.

When Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, one of the things going on was that Jesus was working out who he was and who he would be. The Adversary was tempting him to be someone other than who God intended him to be. And Jesus experienced how subtle and seductive those temptations could be. The potential for succumbing to any of them could have easily led in the direction of the demonic.

This, to me, is the great value of hearing the story of Jesus' temptations every year on this First Sunday in Lent. It is profoundly helpful, when we face questions about our own identity, to see how alluring the temptations were for Jesus to be someone other than God intended him to be, and to hear him struggle as he sorted out who he was.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews took great comfort in knowing that Jesus faced the same things we face, that Jesus can sympathize with our plight as a result, and that he is praying for us constantly as our Great High Priest. The author of the Epistle wrote: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

As we try to answer to the question, "who am I?" during Lent, and as we at St. Paul's ponder questions about this parish's identity, it is good to remind ourselves of what we might call the Christian Haggadah – the story of our own liberation from sin and death.

It begins by saying, with our Jewish siblings, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" – by acknowledging that we have Abraham and Sarah as forebears, and that God chooses us as God's own. Our Haggadah continues through the Old Testament story of God's people – our enslavement and our deliverance at the Red Sea, our wilderness wanderings, and our entry into the Promised Land.

And then, as Christians, we go on to tell a very special and particular story – the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – how God sent the Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to the one who is the God of us all. Our individual stories and the story of this community are part of that larger story – of slavery and freedom, of death and resurrection.

We'll tell the story this morning again over a meal – it's a highly ritualized meal, but it's a meal nonetheless. The story we will tell ourselves as we take the bread and the wine is the story of God's forgiveness, of our deliverance from sin and death, and of the joy that is ours because we are God's holy people.

Whether we are the wise child, or the scornful child, or the simple child, or the one who doesn't even know enough to ask – we will keep the feast. In doing this we will have the clearest sense possible of who we are – people who are forgiven, loved and freed because Jesus laid down his life for us. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. . . . God brought us to this place and gave it to us, a place flowing with milk and honey. . . . and, above all, God's marvelous love. This is who you are and who I am. This is who we are together, and it's very Good News indeed.

Amen.