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March 10, 2019 – Lent I  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Luke 4:1-13  
“The Wheat and the Chaff”

The beginning of Lent often feels like New Year's to me. We don't use the language of "resolutions," but we often talk about the things we'll be "giving up" for Lent in ways that feel a lot like resolutions.

So, if you feel down because you didn't decide to give anything up for Lent this year, but deep down sorta feel like you *should* have, or if you decided to give something up but you've already slipped up: Well, congratulations, you have all given up something for Lent this year: one hour of sleep! I know, poor joke. But I'm feeling pretty righteous for giving up that lovely hour, so you might as well, too!

During Lent this year, in our worship, we're not focusing on giving things up. We're focusing on truth-telling, on how to sort the proverbial wheat from chaff, and how to identify the voice of God in amongst the many voices of scripture and the many voices claiming to speak for God within and around us.

Truth-telling is something we hear about almost constantly. What is real news? What is fake news? We are inundated with political fact checkers and lie counters. We struggle to know how to trust what we read and hear.

We know that both foreign agents, and domestic political activists, have carried out stunningly-successful campaigns to influence the opinions of the citizenry of the United States. We know that there are social media accounts and news sites and stories that are completely fabricated. We know that millions of us have been willing to uncritically read and believe and share these sites and stories. And, we know that there is fake news all over the political map, not just on "their" side, whichever side that is.

We know that there are "bubbles" -- circles of exposure and acquaintance -- that limit what we see, so that we see less and less of what we disagree with and more and more of opinions that are like our own. Algorithms dedicated to tracking our clicks and "likes" in order to give us more things like the ones we've clicked on before. Facebook has even admitted that they manipulated people's feeds, to figure out whether it would affect their emotions and moods. They did this to 700,000 people, without their consent.<sup>1</sup>

And there are physical bubbles -- churches these days are often bubbles of commonality. Bubbles are comfy and nice. Churches are becoming more and more "bubbly" as we shop congregations that give us theological justifications for what we already wanted to believe.

I broke out of my bubble in one small way this year -- I "followed" President Trump on Facebook, because I wanted to read his own words to describe his choices, and I wanted to read the comments. I don't know whether it's helped broaden my perspective or not, but it does remind me, on a daily basis, that there are plenty of folks who filter the news differently than I do.

I came into this sermon, and this season, very hopeful and inspired by the image of the wheat. Excited to think about focusing on wheat, not chaff. As

progressive Christians, I think it is a real temptation to focus more on chaff than wheat. It is easy to point to all the chaff of Christian history in order to justify throwing out the wheat entirely, like the baby with the bath water. Or maybe just to never get around to the wheat at all because there's so much chaff to scoff at.

I have learned a little bit about wheat and chaff this last week, and they're related differently than I thought. Chaff is not *extraneous* and *unnecessary* to wheat. Chaff is actually extremely important. It's the dry husk surrounding the wheat berry, protecting it from external harm. So for most of the life of the wheat berry, the chaff is absolutely essential.

And the chaff is actually not easy to remove. I read an amusing account of a science teacher (not a farmer by background) who decided to plant one row of wheat in his garden, just for kicks.<sup>2</sup> Growing the wheat was no problem; harvesting it was a whole 'nother thing. A very violent thing, it turns out, which involves literally beating the wheat until the chaff, or husk, is broken apart. Nun-chucks, it turns out, were originally farming equipment made to flail rice and other grains, like wheat. So, yes, separating wheat from chaff is essentially a martial art.

Once the chaff is broken apart, it can be rather easily separated from the wheat berries, as it is much lighter than the wheat berries, and can be sifted simply by throwing it in the air. The air will carry away the light husks, leaving the heavier wheat berries to fall to the floor.

But wheat and chaff are not equivalent to the sheep and the goats, for example, in Matthew. They are not opposites -- one being bad the other good. They are parts of the same whole, and without the protective chaff, there would be no wheat berries to harvest.

I hate it when a metaphor I thought I understood turns out to be quite different than I'd thought. I'm guessing many of you already knew this. My father, a Nebraska farm boy himself, is probably embarrassed that I had to find out about wheat harvesting on Google! I imagine I was told all this at some point, and then forgot. Grandpa Gascho's probably rolling in his grave.

The beauty of it is that the metaphor of wheat and chaff is actually all the more amazing to me, even though it's different than I'd thought. And perhaps even more apt as a metaphor for getting to truth. What if those bubbles we find ourselves in are like chaff? Protective husks that surround our most deeply held values and beliefs? Those bubbles serve extraordinarily important purposes -- helping our psyches and our values survive in adverse environments. For many people in this world, it is their very *bodies* that must be protected to survive.

I think of the deeply-cherished individual and community narratives that are so very, very, very hard to give up. And frankly, I'm not sure that they can just be given up, any more easily than a wheat berry can just decide to shed its husk. And yet, one cannot live on chaff ... we must get to the kernel to be nourished.

So, what do wheat and chaff have to do with our scriptures for today? The passage in Deuteronomy 26 is one that I have always thought of as being straight-up wheat berry. A message to just be ground up as-is, no sifting needed, and made into dough. And then baked into a yummy bagel. And then toasted and schmearred.

I *love* that sentence -- "a wandering Aramean was my ancestor." The reminder that we, too, have been exiles and aliens that we come from a people who

have had to pull up tent stakes and move in order to survive, in order to follow God's call. In some other sermon in a parallel universe, I was going to compare this sentence to the wonderful Disney movie, Moana, in which the young woman discovers that, unbeknownst to her, her ancestors were sailors and wanderers, with spirits much like hers. But that sermon is not for today -- I do HIGHLY recommend the movie, though, for all ages. It is one of my favorite stories ever.

I love the reminder in this Deuteronomy passage that God seeks our freedom and loathes our suffering. And I love the call in this passage to share with *everyone* in one's community, not just family, and not just one's bubble.

But I confess that in my preparation for this sermon today, I found myself wondering if much of this story isn't protective covering of a hidden kernel. The story reads uncomfortably like our country's Thanksgiving proclamations. A beautiful image of a shared table between old and new inhabitants of a land. In this story, the people being addressed by the author of Deuteronomy have newly come to the land, been given it by God to possess. And already they call the others in the land "aliens." But, ah, they are so generously sharing their bounty with the "aliens" among them. Sharing their best, their first. *Everyone is celebrating.*

And I can't help but see the Pilgrims & the "Indians" and that first mythical Thanksgiving that never happened. I read this passage and think -- Aha! This is where we learned to do it: to attach a thin veneer of gratitude to a situation of inequity and, *voila!* Injustice disappears. Gratitude makes our injustice fall off. Whatever we have that is "too much" becomes simply "blessing," and suddenly sharing from our "blessing" makes us the righteous ones. Not the ones usurping power and access to resources.

We here in Lancaster have genuinely done great things in welcoming the strangers who come here as refugees and asylum seekers. But this story in Deuteronomy is about sharing with strangers whose land you're now occupying. And we, speaking from my whiteness, we here in Lancaster have not done so well negotiating just relationships with those who lived here before us, whose land flowing with milk and honey we were "given" possess and subdue.

One thing that this passage in Deuteronomy and the American Dream have in common is that they're narratives about things being "too good to be true." And the response to things being "too good to be true" is to say, "Why, thank you! What a blessing! I must have lucked out!" Because it is rude to look a gift horse in the mouth, right?

But I don't think this "too good to be true" stuff will bear up on the threshing floor. Whiteness in American *is* too good to be true. The gift bag that comes with maleness and straightness and cisness and able-bodiedness and inherited wealth and American-ness *is* too good to be true. And when something's too good to be true, we should speak up, we should 'fess up, and make it right. Why does the person at the raw end of the deal always have to be the one to speak up?

But we have great chaff/husk-stories. *Our* ancestors were once persecuted (which for white Mennonites is getting to be a stretch as the years go by). And that chaff-husk needs to be broken if we only use those stories to justify our current bounty rather than truly making things equal with those who are *currently* powerless and persecuted.

The gospel text for today is quite interesting to lay alongside the Deuteronomy passage. It's Luke's version of Jesus' 40 days in the desert and his subsequent temptations. After being led into the desert by the Holy Spirit, and spending 40 days there, fasting, Jesus was, not surprisingly, famished. The devil tempts him three times: 1) if you're the Son of God, command this stone to turn into bread, 2) look at the kingdoms of the world -- all their glory and power can be yours if you worship me, and 3) if you're the Son of God, jump off the highest tower of the temple, and command a legion of angels to save you.

This story is so interesting from the point of view of the question of finding the voice of God in scripture, because both the devil and Jesus are quoting and dueling scriptures with each other. Interestingly, Jesus twice quotes the book of Deuteronomy in his replies. When he is baited to turn stone into bread, he references Deuteronomy's take on the manna God provided to the children of Israel in the wilderness, post-Exodus. The reference is about how manna, in its daily availability, and yet resistance to being stored or hoarded, taught the people of Israel not to rely on bread alone.

This Luke passage shows us how easily you can find multiple voices and interpretations in the same scripture. In this case, it's literally the voice of the devil, and the voice of Jesus. The thing is, the devil isn't misquoting scripture, or quoting "wrong" or "bad" scripture. He's quoting the same book as Jesus. What he's able to justify with his quoting is the problem. Jesus often quotes scripture in the Gospels, but he doesn't always *interpret* it in ways that biblical scholars, or regular "churchgoers" of his day seemed to expect.

It seems to me that Jesus' responses to the temptations can be laid alongside the Deuteronomy passage with very interesting results. Jesus is presented with the option to *command* bread into being, to have bread without effort. But even coming at the peak of his hunger and weakness, Jesus says no to the milk and honey, to the guarantee of magically appearing bread, to getting his needs met by *command*. He is not compelled to be compensated for hunger by receiving excess.

Jesus is presented with the having kingdoms, having power, having glory, and he says a firm no. He will worship God, not power. How does that lay alongside the Deuteronomy need to *have* land and *possess it*, to be in power over the people of the land? He is baited to jump off the tallest tower of the Temple and summon an army to save himself. And he says no. He said no even more profoundly at his crucifixion -- that he would not call down an army to protect himself. He would not use self-defense to justify violence. That there are worse fates than death.

Jesus doesn't say "thank you" for these amazing "blessings" he's offered. He says no.

In light of our Lenten search for the wheat and the yes, I say yes to this teaching of Jesus, to this voice in the scripture, even as I struggle to respond to the same temptations in the way that I see him modeling.

Is the Deuteronomy 26 passage "bad"? I think there is wheat in it -- but a complicated chaff-husk has been written around it. And I think the wheat within it is a deeper, more nourishing, more equitable truth than the words we've been handed. But here's the thing: if the Bible contains the wheat of God, it's not a bag of wheat

berries, much less a bag of King Arthur flour, much less that bagel, toasted with a schmear. It's wheat for the harvesting. Which is hard work. And that is not an insult to the Bible or to God. Anything else is an insult to our own integrity and intelligence, I think, which is a kind of insult to God, you might say.

We find ourselves walking among the wheat, watching it grow, as it ripples in the sunlight. Painfully, clumsily, insistently cutting it down with scythes. Knocking at it with our winnowing forks and nun-chucks. Mennonites with nun-chucks, how's that gonna go?

The chaff-husks we find, whether they're written into the Biblical stories, or whether we've encased our interpretations and stories into husks of our own making, these chaff-husks have likely served a sacred purpose for someone, maybe even ourselves.

But that doesn't mean that, ultimately, they mustn't be broken down and blown away by a loving breath in order to find the wheat berry inside. At the very least, let us not fool ourselves into believing that a husk *is* the berry. I think at some level we know very well, as we crunch the shells in our mouths, and battle our constant hunger from spiritual malnutrition, that we haven't reached the center.

I'll close with a caveat. This Lent we are examining the invitation to do some voluntary breaking of the husks that protect the wheat in the scripture and in our lives. Please know that this always only an invitation. You may be someone who's had plenty of external husk-breaking in ways you may not have given your consent to, Or you may not be in a safe place to break open your chaff. Trust yourself to know whether the invitation for you is to crack open some husks, or to honor what is legitimately keeping you safe.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Arthur. Facebook emotion study breached ethical guidelines, researchers say. June 30, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/30/facebook-emotion-study-breached-ethical-guidelines-researchers-say>

<sup>2</sup> Separating the wheat from the chaff, Thursday, March 12, 2009. <http://doyle-scienceteach.blogspot.com/2009/03/separating-wheat-from-chaff.html>