

In our first reading today, Moses is instructing the people how to make their offerings to God. Specifically he speaks of the first fruits. Offering to God the first fruits, the finest of their harvest, the best of their livestock, was an ancient spiritual practice. This was how the ancient people stayed connected to God. The practice can be traced all the way back to the story of Cain and Abel. Abel was a herdsman who offered the best of his flock, his firstlings, to God. Cain was a farmer who simply offered some of the fruit, not the first fruits. Abel's offering was accepted, Cain's was not.

The history of our relationship with God is a repeated cycle. We start out walking with God but then we begin to drift away. We stop offering the firstlings of our flock or the first fruits of our harvest. We may perhaps offer some small token out of habit but as we drift further away from God we lose His protection and become vulnerable to our enemies. When we have reached our lowest point, when we are at the farthest point away from God, then God sends someone who leads us back to Him. This cycle is repeated throughout our history.

The offering of first fruits was a way for the ancient people to remember their reliance on God. The first fruits were the first harvest of grapes, olives, and grains. It was customary at the time to store these first fruits as a hedge, a safety net to get the people through the winter.

But the people of God would instead bring these first fruits to the tabernacle or the temple as an offering to God. By doing so, they gave up their "safety net" and showed their complete dependence on God.

Moses not only instructs the people how to make their offering but more importantly he tells them why they should do it. Moses reminds the people of all that God has done for them.

Because God had given the people the Promised Land, everything they had, everything they received from the land, they owed to God. And so out of a sense of justice, they offered the first fruits of the land back to God.

This offering of first fruits was also a sign of hope. The people longed to be reunited with God, to walk with Him once again in the Garden. This could not be accomplished by earthly wealth or prosperity, by how much you had stored in your barns for the winter.

This desire to be in communion with God can only come from a true and lasting friendship with the Lord.

The offering of first fruits then, gave the ancient Israelites a context for their lives. They were part of a much larger story, a story that had its roots deep in the past and would reach its climax in the future. By remembering their past, they kept their future safe.

And to help them remember their past, Moses reminds them. Throughout the Old Testament, prophets and patriarchs do just what Moses is doing today. He is catechizing the people. He is reminding them of their story.

He reminds them that their ancestors were wandering nomads who went down to Egypt where they lived as strangers in a strange land.

When they became too numerous the Egyptians enslaved and oppressed them. But the Lord heard their cry and led them out of Egypt. With great power and miraculous signs and wonders the people passed through the waters of the Red Sea. A pillar of fire led them forward and confounded the Egyptians who pursued them. Eventually God led His people to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This story is also our story, it is a story fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.

Because of the disobedience of our first parents, and the loss of grace, we were exiled from the Garden. We were wanderers who fell into a state of sin and death. A state in which we were held in bondage.

But Our Lord came to lead us out of slavery. With great power and miraculous signs and wonders, He leads us through the waters of Baptism and restores to us our lost grace. He leads us forward, to a new Heaven and a new Earth, where He will walk with us once again in the Garden. If we follow Him, He will also confound our enemies, the agents of the devil who constantly seek to bring us back to the land of sin and death.

The devil is just as interested in us as he was in Jesus. He wants us to forget God's promise to us. He wants us to disregard the part each of us has to play in our journey to the Promised Land.

And so he plays upon our weaknesses. He wants us to focus on fleeting pleasure, comfort, power, and fame. This was how he tempted Jesus, and how he continues to tempt us.

But Jesus had other, long term desires. He wanted to teach us how to serve others instead of ourselves. He wanted to remain faithful to the Father and win over our friendship.

Jesus remembered the bigger picture and was able to overcome the temptations of the devil, and govern those short-sighted desires. Each temptation was met with a passage from the Bible. The Bible is a chronicle of the story of our salvation. The Bible helps us to remember that story.

At every celebration of the Mass we hear God's Word. It is not just a retelling of quaint, ancient stories. Through these readings the Church is reminding us of the bigger picture, of all that God has done for us. Then we too can resist the temptations and attacks that we will face in the coming days.

The practice of making offerings to God did not end with Moses. We still make those offerings today. Most obviously we offer according to our means to support our parish and our Church. But do we offer from our surplus or do we offer from our safety net, showing our complete trust in God?

All of our gifts and offerings are symbolically present in the bread and wine that is placed on the altar. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the

second part of Mass, the priest blesses those offerings and prays over them. During this Eucharistic prayer Jesus becomes present under the appearance of bread and wine. At the end of the prayer when the Body and Blood of Christ is lifted up, Father recites the doxology, “through Him, with Him, and in Him.” At that moment, we, the People of God in His Church, are offering to the Father not just the first fruits of our own labors, which are contaminated by our selfishness, but the first fruits of the redeemed human race: Jesus himself.

Jesus offered himself perfectly to the Father on the cross, and at Mass, that offering is made present so that we can unite our imperfect offerings to Him.

That is the power of the Mass. The celebration of the Mass reminds us that each one of us is an integral part of a much bigger story.

But our continued offering is only part of the equation. We must also remember our story.

The Bible shows us that it only takes one generation of poor catechesis for an entire people to lose their faith. Poor catechesis starts us on the downward trend of that repeated cycle that we seem to live out over and over again.

In looking back, I think we can say that the years following the second Vatican council was such a time of poor catechesis. We see the results of it all around us today. The majority of our society has fallen so far away from God they are not even aware that there is a problem.

We need to catechize our children. We need to tell them our story. It is easy enough to do. We do not need to be great theologians or Bible scholars. All we need to do is remember all the good things that God has done for us, and tell that to our children.

If we are part of that poorly catechized generation then that is where we start as well. Remember the story as simply as Moses told it to his people today. We were wanderers who fell into the bondage of sin and death, and God came to lead us back to Him.

We can expand upon that of course. There is much more to tell, but that is a good starting point.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a time for us to reflect upon our lives and our relationship with God. It is a time for us to enter more deeply into our story and share that story with others. It is a time for us to remember our lives in the context of our friendship with God. It is a time of justice and hope and a time of offering.

If we do this, then when the cycle turns upward, perhaps for the last time, and we once again walk with God, when Our Lord returns to judge the living and the dead, He will find faith among His people.