

Remember Who You Are
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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Six years ago, Alice Plebuch¹ made a decision that would alter her future, or really, her past. She sent away for one of those just-for-fun DNA tests that you've been hearing all about. She wanted to know exactly what she was made of. At age 69, she already had a pretty rough idea what she would find out. Her parents were already deceased, Irish American Catholics who raised her and six siblings in church every Sunday with ethnic pride. She wanted more concretely to know about her father, the son of an Irish immigrant who had been raised in an orphanage from a young age. His extended family tree was a little murkier than she was comfortable with.

After a few weeks, during which her saliva was carefully analyzed, she got an email in the summer of 2012 with a link to her results. The report was confounding. About half of her DNA was as expected, a mixed British Isles bloodline. The other half picked up an unexpected combination of European Jewish, Middle Eastern and Eastern European descent.

"Surely somebody in the lab messed up!" she thought. So, she penned a letter to Ancestry.com in these early days of direct-to-consumer DNA testing to let them know of the mistake. After talking to family, she took the test again and to her surprise, got the same result!

"The information she received posed a fundamental mystery about her very identity. *It meant that one of her parents wasn't who he or she was supposed to be – and, by extension, neither was she.*" Plebuch would eventually write back to Ancestry, saying you were right and I was wrong. [end article]

She's not the only person who wants to know who they are. I wonder: *Do you know who you are?* "The number of people who have had their DNA analyzed with direct-to-consumer genetic genealogy tests more than doubled during 2017 and now exceeds 12 million, according to industry estimates."²

Earlier this year, the genealogy company Ancestry.com, based in Utah, announced that it has tested more than seven million people, including two million during the last four months of 2017. The company's customer rolls exceed those of all competitors combined. The second-largest player, 23andMe, has tested more than three million. In 2015, all companies totaled 1.5 million tests. Today, its over 12.2M.

¹ Paraphrase as reported by Libby Copeland, "Who Was She? A DNA Test Only Opened New Mysteries." *The Washington Post* (July 27, 2017).

² Antonio Regalado, "2017 was the year consumer DNA testing blew up," *MIT Technology Review* (Feb. 12, 2018).

Everybody, it seems, wants to know who they are. People everywhere are in search of their story. Do you know who you are?

Who Do You Think You Are? Is the question that serves as the title of a recent TV series looking to capitalize on the same genre and ride the wave of interest. In each episode a different celebrity goes on a journey to trace parts of his or her family tree with an expert at their side to help them uncover their illustrious, or not so illustrious, past. The shows promo says: “To know who you are you have to know where your story begins.”

They’re right, actually. *But if we want to know who we are, we’d better be looking to the right story.* In **Deuteronomy 26**, the Israelite people are instructed to remember exactly who it is they are. Deuteronomy reports this passage as a part one of the sermons of Moses, having lived for a generation in the wilderness and standing on the verge of taking possession of the land that God had promised them, the Hebrews receive instructions about how life will go when they get there.

As we’ve read, one of the very first things they’re to do after they have come into the land and settled in it, was to “take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that Lord you God is giving you, and you shall put in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.” (26:2)

This passage explains to them how this act of worship was to go, it’s a liturgy for what they were supposed to do as they carried out this ritual reminder of who they are what their relationship with God is. This presentation of their first fruits is a moment that allows them to enact and declare the unique identity given to them by God. And as they brought this offering to the temple, and placed this basket before the priests, as verse 3 shows, the worshippers would declare two things: (1) that this land and everything it produces is a gift and (2) that they receive it as recipients of all of the promises God has made throughout Genesis.

After they’ve done this, the priest will take their offering from them and place it on the altar before the Lord. And as this is done, the text tells us, they were to recite a very specific response. They were to recall a story.

And so the story goes...

‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation...’ (26:5)

If you’re familiar with the biblical text, you know that what we hear in this passage are echoes of Israel’s past. This is a recounting of events that the reader of the Old Testament to this point already knows to be true. In the Biblical tradition, the great Patriarchs of Scripture trace their origin back to geographical region of Mesopotamia, or in Hebrew, Aram. The ancestral home of Abraham, for example, is found in Aram. And when Isaac and Jacob needed wives, we read in

Genesis 24 and 28 that they went back to Aram – modern day Syria, a region stretching from mountains of Lebanon east to the Euphrates.

In his book, *Outliers*³, Malcolm Gladwell explains how cultural narratives influence people. He shows how the traditions and attitudes that we inherit from our ancestors can directly influence the outcome of our lives, our relative success or failure.

In the book he tells the story of Korean Air, who more was at risk of crashes in the 1990s than any other airline. For one period, they had seventeen times higher loss rate than any other airline. Their safety record was so poor that in 1999 Delta Airlines and Air France ceased cooperation, followed soon by the US Army. Research would later show that the root cause of so many cockpit errors was directly connected to cultural practices, communication issues rising from relationship between captain and co-pilot as well as breakdowns in communication between pilots and traffic control agents.

He also tries to explain why it is that Southern men are more aggressive than Northern men, beginning with a higher murder rate in Harlan, Kentucky in the post Civil War America. He shows that its heritage, the Scott-Irish herdsman ancestry, that most contributes to their cultural assumptions. Why was there more violence in Harlan, KY than anywhere else, he asks. Because of where they were from.

It turns out there may be something to this genealogy craze after all.

“Who we are,” Gladwell writes, “cannot be separated from where we’re from.”⁴

So, when Deuteronomy 26 speaks of “a wandering Aramean,” they are recalling the heritage of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, their tribes, their ancestral home and history. The words chosen here point to a rich tradition, but also remind the people that their ancestors were a vulnerable, at-risk people, a wandering clan who have become what they are not because of their physical strength or intellectual prowess, but because of their faithfulness to God and – more so – God’s faithfulness to them.

More than that, they recall their story of captivity, the slavery their ancestors once endured at the hands of the Egyptians and the redeeming work of God in delivering them into the promised land, remaining faithful to the covenant he made with their ancestors long before.

So we read, in verses 5-10, that in bringing their offering to the Lord they are to declare before the priest the story of *Israel’s most treasured memory*, the identity-shaping narrative of all Israel’s life. And in these verses, in this proclamation they were to make, is preserved for all Hebrew life their identity as YHWH’s people.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2011), 161-249.

⁴ *Ibid*, 221.

You may hear at first a less than captivating explanation of Israelite worship but listen closer to the instructions and you can hear the intent. They're saying, "**Remember who you are!**" The stories we know and believe to be true about ourselves and our world change who we are. Stories shape us. Our lives get meaning and purpose from the stories that guide our understanding.

Maybe its no surprise then, that on the verge of inheriting a new land and pursuing the identity which God had given to them, the Israelites are being taught a regular act or worship in which they will remind themselves where they're from "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean..." I come from a vulnerable, at-risk people who have been taken into the purposes of God for the sake of the world.

Alistair McIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*⁵, uses a funny story to help explain how certain events receive their meaning in light of the story they are a part of. He imagines himself at a bus stop when a young man standing next to him suddenly says: "The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus.*" The sentence is understandable, but the problem is how to respond to it, and why is he saying it? Maybe the young man has mistaken him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, "Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?" Or maybe he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The psychotherapist urges him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, "What shall I say?" The psychotherapist says, "Oh, anything at all." Or again, maybe, he is a foreign spy waiting at prearranged rendezvous and he has just uttered the oddly chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact.

In each case, the meaning of the odd encounter at the bus stop depends on finding its place in the narrative. *In fact, each story will give the event a different meaning.*

Do you know who you are? Is it clear what story your life is part of?
What story are the events of your life pointing to?

Let's try a second odd sentence to guess the context: "Better than the last time I wore a robe." There are several options for understanding the meaning of this one, too. Maybe the man is enjoying his first morning home after a long hospital stay when his spouse asked: how do you feel? Or maybe the supreme court judge was asked by the reporter how she felt after writing her official opinion. Or maybe, the choir member was asked by their innocent child how they felt about this week's choir anthem? "Better than the last time I wore a robe." See, the story matters.

One year ago today, Ken Parker was among the hundreds of white-nationalists who marched the streets of Charlottesville, VA in a rally of hate-fueled riots. "I was a grand dragon of the KKK," said Parker, "and then the Klan wasn't hateful enough for me, so I decided to become a Nazi."

⁵ Alistair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007), 210.

But it was inside a Charlottesville parking garage that the heat-exhausted Ken was touched by the kindness of Deeyah Khan, a minority filmmaker there to make a documentary of this evil. Compelled by her kindness, he later approached an African-American neighbor, William McKinnon III, who is also the pastor of a local church.

After being invited to attend that church, the former KKK leader stood before the 70 person African-American congregation on April 17th and shared his testimony. Ken Parker says that the loving and gracious response of that congregation was overwhelming.

Parker later joined others from the church on the shores of the Atlantic ocean. Each of them, wearing white robes, entered the water one by one, hand in hand with the pastor for baptism. Still dripping from the celebration, standing back on the shore, and asked how he felt, Parker said: *"Better than the last time I was wearing a robe."*⁶

Ken Parker received a new story, and suddenly things have a new meaning. The story he now finds himself in is the same one he reenacted in that ocean, the story of a God who becomes who human, gives his life on the cross, is buried in the grave, and rises again to a new life.

It's the story of the God who, as Phillipians 2 describes:

...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason, also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil. 2:6-11

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin put it this way: "The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part? [...] *The Christian story provides us with a set of lenses, not something for us to look at, but for us to look through.*"⁷

This Old Testament story may feel foreign to you, removed from your experience. How could it become yours?

But future generations of Hebrews were never in Egypt. They weren't a part of the acts that they're describing. And when they say "The Lord brought us out of Egypt," they're making that story their own. The speech works so that the speaker becomes a present-tense participant in

⁶ Aaron Franco, "Ex-KKK member denounces hate groups one year after rallying in Charlottesville," *NBC News* (Aug 9, 2018).

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 15; 38.

that old event.⁸ They're reminding themselves that over and above every story that could or would define who they are, they choose to live in light of the God who has faithfully redeemed them.

There were plenty of other options in the ancient world, and no fewer sin-driven stories to lead God's people astray. But if they can allow themselves to be shaped by God's story, there's hope not simply for them, but for the whole world. This, friends, is the calling of Christian life. What was true for the Israelites is no less true today.

We live in a day of competing stories. In fact, we live in a day that says there can't *really* be one true story of the world. Each one's story is equal valid according to their own experience. Even more, we live as people who are so out of touch with who we are. We're so quick to lose sight of what it means to live in our lives, our careers, our families, our neighborhoods, as people who have been redeemed.

But God's story, the story we come to know most fully in the person of Jesus Christ and that is alive and at work in our midst through the power of the Holy Spirit, *is* the true story of the world. We are called not simply to look at it, or find things we agree with in it, or apply some piece of it every now and then, but to let it remind us *who we are*.

No less than 10 languages are used in the gospel ministry that takes place on this campus every week, cultural backgrounds that originate all over the globe, family histories of every economic scale, heritages shaped by all sorts of stories. But what we believe as Christians is that every one of those is laid at the feet of Jesus as we receive from him a new story to live and let it correct and revise and reshape every part of our own. Nothing is safe from the reign of God in the life of those who follow Jesus.

This creates a tension in Christian life: that on the one hand we are seeking to live together in light of Scripture, but on the other hand we live in a world, in a culture, that embodies a different story. Hear me as I say that there are parts of that story that are irreconcilable with the story of Scripture, parts of who I am and who you are that have no place in God's story for the world. *Remember who you are*.

A wandering Aramean was not literally my ancestor, my family tree has roots in the back woods of Louisiana and a small London neighborhood, but I take this story as my own and it becomes who I am. Of all the things that make a claim on who I am – my job, my place, my heritage, my nationality, my talents, my appearance, my personal past – the heritage I claim in Christ is the one that tells me who I am. This means, for us all, that how we mother or father, how talk or act, how we work or play or rest – all of it must be done within this new story.

⁸ Walter Bruggeman, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 247.

“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” Romans 12 puts it, “and do not conform to the pattern of this world.” To be a follower of Jesus is to become a part of God’s story, to take the story that we encounter through the Scriptures and let it become who we are, our very identity.

We receive together that God has made a people for himself. This morning we’ve heard it proclaimed in several languages to remind us: “*for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*” You receive from God not only your identity as a person, but where you belong. We receive our identity as a people, that the community of Christ, the body of believers that gathers in this place each week, is not just somewhere to attend or to go but a people to which we belong. This, Scripture tells us, is the true story of the world.

Begun in the story of a wandering Aramean and working its way through a whole history of unlikely characters in the house of Israel, the God who heard their cry and delivered them out of Egypt has also redeemed us. And in Jesus Christ, we too have received an inheritance. Once we were not a people, but now we are a people. One we were not Israelites, but we have been grafted in to what was begun so long ago, that God might set apart for himself a people for the sake of the whole world. You are called to be a part of *that people*.

Remember who you are.