

I occasionally get a greeting card from a relative out of state. She always writes some memory she has of my parents – a conversation with them, something that her parents and mine did together years ago, some sacrifice they made so we could live a better life. I always feel a little better connected to my ancestors whenever her card comes in. Sometimes the family stories we hear have passed through some filters. Some family members may remember events differently than others do. But we each are the product of our previous generations and the stories that formed their values.

Today's first reading is a story about a story. Throughout the season of Lent, the first readings on Sundays always relate some key events that happened to our ancestors from before the time of Christ. On week one this year, Moses tells the people how to make an offering at the local altar. First, he says, you tell the story. You tell the story of how you got here. It starts with a fairly famous quote from the bible: "My father was a wandering Aramean." In other words, my first ancestor was homeless, but he went to Egypt and started a small family there where he was an immigrant. The family grew, and that was great, but then the Egyptians didn't like it that so many foreigners were living in their borders, so they started persecuting these ancestors and made them slaves. The family turned to God for help, and God delivered them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. That's the story. Moses didn't want any of them to forget it. It was a story of simple roots, amazing growth, persecution, deliverance and prosperity. Moses said, you tell that story so you never forget that your freedom came at a price. After you remember those events, Moses says, you offer your gift. You give up the firstfruits from the soil that God gave you. You make a sacrifice so that others will have a better life.

We follow a similar pattern every time we come to mass. First we tell the story of our ancestors. We hear several readings from the bible giving the history of how we got here. They remind us that our freedom as children of God came at a price: the cross. Then we offer our gift. We set before the altar bread, wine and contributions, but those gifts all symbolize us. We give up a little of ourselves at each mass because God has been so good to us.

So, one way to begin Lent is to do this two-part ritual in some way. First, tell God your story. Pray about how you got here. Who were your ancestors? What happened to them? How do you fit into their story? What values did they pass on to you? What was the price they paid for your freedom? Tell that story to God in prayer. Then, offer God something back. God has given you your life, your ethnicity, your family, your skills, and much more. Moses instructed people to give back the firstfruits grown on the soil that God gave them. Well, what is your soil? What did God give you? What fruit is growing in that soil? And how can you give some of that, the first of that, back to God? Lent is about sacrifice, not to make our life harder, but to show our thanks, to show we understand how we got here, to accept our responsibilities, and to give up something so that others may have a better life.