

OT Reading: Ruth 4:9-21**NT Reading and Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-24**

You may recognize the title of this sermon as being similar to one I've given in the recent past, in which I discussed "gleanings and firstfruits." In many ways, this is a continuation of that sermon; but while that exposition before focused on the expectation to give of the best of ourselves, in today's text we are going to see in what ways we have received the best of God's self.

The term "firstfruit" may be a little foreign to some, though I suspect here in the agrarian part of New Jersey, not very many at all. But just in case, I want to explain what in the world a firstfruit is. The name says it all – "first fruit" – and in many ways it is as simple as that; but linguistically, analogically, metaphorically, it is much deeper and more significant. The firstfruit is the first-ripe product of a given crop in a year: the first clusters of grapes; the first olives; the first grain; the first greenbeans; the first tomatoes that are ripe to pick and eat.

They represent successful production; proof of hope and faith; they represent the actualization of the theoretical. What do I mean by this? When the farmer plants the seed for a tomato plant, there are no actual tomatoes in that seed. There is a hope for tomatoes; there is a promise and expectation of tomatoes; and in some sense in the seed, while the tomatoes are thou long-expected tomatoes, we expect them in faith – knowing they will be tomatoes, but honestly unsure of how that fruit will actually turn out.

The firstfruit harvest of tomatoes is the actualization of the long-expected tomatoes, wherein our expectations are confronted with the reality of what is being borne by the tomato plant. Even in perennial crops like olives or oranges, the firstfruits after the blossom are still a confrontation of reality – even though we knew what the harvest was like last year, our expectations may be jolted based on an almost infinite number of variables – rain, drought, new weeds, old weeds, soil health, varmints, carbon dioxide levels, oxygen levels – all of which affect the product, the produce, of the tree.

The first-fruit represents the best fruit, not only in its freshness, but also because it is the first available after the want of it. It is the first available after the want of it. We wait patiently, like the farmer in James 5, for the harvest, in want of the produce, watching it grow, blossom, and ripen. You remember the taste and with a watering mouth you start longing for the taste and texture of those fresh-off-the-vine snap peas or cucumbers. And when they are finally ripe, available after the want of it, we celebrate.

There's a reason every agrarian civilization has festivals and celebrations of the theoretical becoming actual; the "not yet" food showing itself for what it really is, available for the glorious harvest. We have waited patiently – oh, so patiently – laboring all along, yes, but waiting in hungry anticipation for the satisfaction of our hope and faith.

The first fruit, if there ever was any, is the food fit for God. In the book of Nehemiah, we read the Israelites purposing in their hearts to obey the law of God: “We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, **the firstborn of our sons** and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, **the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil**, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God.”¹

The firstfruit principle was serious stuff. The offering of the firstfruits to God is not understood as simply as giving a tithe by writing a check. The offering of firstfruits is that after your days, weeks, months, years of suffering patiently while you labor diligently, you acknowledge that what you have reaped is still too good for you, because without God your labors would be in vain. “It is the LORD who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses. He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast.”²

The firstfruit principle is so serious that the word ראשית is also translated as “chieftest, choicest, finest, foremost.” It is used to describe the most powerful men of the most powerful nations and the finest and most expensive anointing oils in Amos 6. It’s so serious, ראשית is also translated as “beginning”. In fact, THE BEGINNING in Genesis 1:1 is this word ראשית. It’s so important, it’s the first word out of God’s mouth in his revelation to us. The very first word of God describes his finest, his chieftest, his beginning, his firstfruit.

Finally, the firstfruit principle is used to describe the firstborn – with all the subtext, context, and implications of its additional connotations. Jacob tells Reuben, “you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.” Reuben was the beginning, the ראשית, of the continuity of Israel’s legacy. In Psalm 78, God is described as having “struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength.” The tragedy of the 10th plague for the Egyptians was felt more deeply than we imagine with our democratic preferences. But the Egyptians’ firstborn being slain was not just the loss of a family member, it was the loss of the primary legacy, of the vivacity, the very virility of the family.

God himself calls Israel his firstfruits – “Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest.”³ In Exodus, Moses is commanded by God to tell Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, let my son go that he may serve me, but if you refuse to let my son go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.”⁴ And we recall in Hosea, it

¹ Nehemiah 10

² Psalm 135

³ Jeremiah 2:3

⁴ Exodus 4:22

says, “when Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”⁵ We remember that last one especially, because we recognize it as a prophecy about Jesus Christ’s flight to and return from Egypt as a child.

Which is a long way, but hopefully helpful way, of finally arriving at our text.

The Christ was a long-expected event, prophesied for millennia, ever since Eve was promised that her offspring – literally, her seed – would crush the head of the serpent. The faithful of Israel labored for God, and had waited patiently for the seed of Eve to produce, to actualize, to be confronted with the reality of what they had long hoped for.

They looked at God’s promises to his son, Israel, and knew this Christ would be of David,⁶ embodying the best of David’s ancestry – from Boaz to Abraham. They knew those who saw a Messiah in political or military figures like Judas Maccabeus, who drove out the pagan Greek tyrants from the holy temple in 160BC, as powerful and important as he was, those who looked to people like him would be disappointed.

They looked at the promises to Abraham, that through his offspring, his seed, they would be made the chiefest, choicest, among nations, too numerous to count.⁷ Through centuries and centuries of slavery, oppression, exile, and suffering because of their sin, the faithful still knew that God would keep his promises of delivering a Messiah. The long-expected Christ WOULD come, and the children of Israel would be confronted with the reality of what they had hoped for.

Oh, what a day when that long-expected fruit of Eve, that fruit of Abraham, that fruit of Boaz, that fruit of David, the anointed one who would bring good news to the poor, would heal the brokenhearted, would proclaim liberty to the captives, would open of the eyes of the blind; would set at liberty the oppressed; **THE ONE WHO WOULD FINALLY PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR!**⁸

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child – **FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT!**

Don’t miss this. This is important. The very child in the womb of Mary – yes, he was the fruit of Eve, the fruit of Abraham, the fruit of Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and David. But this flesh-and-blood child in the womb of Mary is the direct and immediate fruit of the eternal, holy spirit – that same Holy Spirit that hovered over the face of the waters **IN THE BEGINNING;**⁹ that same Holy Spirit that was with David even in his sin.¹⁰

⁵ Hosea 11:1

⁶ See Isaiah 9 and Jeremiah 30, e.g.

⁷ See Genesis 12 and 15, and Galatians 3

⁸ Isaiah 61 and Luke 4

⁹ Genesis 1:2

¹⁰ Psalm 51:11

That flesh-and-blood child in the flesh-and-blood womb of Mary was the firstfruit of God, his only begotten son,¹¹ the firstborn of all creation.¹²

This is that firstfruit – that beginning – that was “In the Beginning”¹³ and by whom all things were created, and who is preeminent over all things, and in him all things are held together; and he is the head – the *rosh*, whence the word *reshit* comes – of the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn even from the dead, that in EVERYTHING – in birth, death, and everything in between – he might be preeminent.¹⁴ He is the very word of God spoken IN THE BEGINNING and throughout history, and was made flesh and dwelt among us.¹⁵

Jesus was the beginning, the ראשית, and the preeminent legacy of God. This is not Reuben, the ראשית of Jacob. This is the Christ, the son of the living God. This is not a wandering Israel; this is the true, holy Israel. This, this, is Christ the King! This babe – GOD – the son of Mary. This is Immanuel – GOD WITH US!

The consummate firstfruit – the beginning of all things, the chiefest of everything, the best stuff there could possibly be – has finally come. And oh how sweet that harvest is for those that have long-expected it. This is the bread of life who, if we feed on him, will never hunger. Recall the satisfaction of Simeon, who was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel – the Holy Spirit was upon him – and when he saw the Christ child, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”¹⁶

The offspring of Boaz acted worthily in Ephratha and is renowned in Bethlehem, just as Boaz was – not of his own merit but “because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman, Ruth. The offspring of Boaz is the long-expected harvest. That harvest Boaz gave to Ruth and his redemption of her was amazing, yes. But we know that not even Boaz could offer the consummate firstfruit to his bride. Boaz knew that consummation would come in his offspring, and that out of Bethlehem Ephratha, though it be small among the clans of Judah, nevertheless shall bring forth – or birth – one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days, FROM THE BEGINNING. And he shall feed and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, and in the majesty and the name of the LORD his God, and they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace.

¹¹ John 3:16

¹² Colossians 1:15

¹³ John 1:1

¹⁴ Colossians 1:16-18.

¹⁵ John 1:14

¹⁶ Luke 2:25-32

The firstfruit principle is serious stuff. We marvel at Christ's birth – humiliated in such an estate to be born among the waste and slobber of beasts. By all physical appearances, he was the rotting fruit left on the ground – the not-worth-it fruit, the gleanings. But oh church, we regard Christ not for what he looks like. We regard Christ for what he is, the consummate firstfruit, whose glory knows no end, whose sweetness is beyond measure, whose power is everlasting, whose love is perfect, in whom we have been given eternal life to feed on him forever.

The firstfruit principle is serious stuff. If you do not marvel at Christ's birth and humiliation, you likely also don't understand him as the supreme and ultimate authority of the universe. If you understand Christmas to be only about how beautiful the creche is, then you likely also don't understand how ugly your sin is before a Holy God.

This same firstfruit who came, fallen for us from on high, to be birthed in such a low estate, showed us how ugly our hearts are even if we pretend to do the right thing, and then died for our sins, but having led the perfect life, did not stay in the grave; no he sanctified the grave and became the firstfruit of the resurrection, risen from the dead, so that we may do the same. It is my prayer that you know or come to know Christ in this way, and that this Christmas you would regard Christ for who he is, not JUST the circumstances surrounding his birth.

For those who do regard and worship Christ for who he is – the consummate firstfruit – do not be silent about this wonderful news of Christmas. The prophet Isaiah encourages us: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion: 'Your God Reigns.' The voice of your watchmen – they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion."¹⁷

BENEDICTION:

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God, and the communion of the
Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.

¹⁷ Isaiah 52:7-8