I think that most of us have stories that we tell over and over again. They are stories that have become a part of us; they help define us. They may be memorable events which have stuck with us, or they may be stories that involve us directly in some way. An example of the first is the “I remember exactly where I was, and what I was doing, when I learned about Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon”, or “when 9/11 happened”. The story isn’t so much about where we were, or what we were doing, as it was the larger event. Still, it doesn’t take much for us to recall the story . . . for those events have become part of us; their impact helped shape us, in one way or another.

Usually having more impact are those stories in which we were players. These are stories to which we might return more often than just the anniversaries of the events like I just mentioned. One such story that I often tell (and I apologize if you’ve me tell it before!) happened a number of years ago when I was the Episcopal campus minister at UC-Berkeley. I had volunteered to be on a committee that was planning a student leadership conference at Cal. (The conference had little to do with religious life, other than some religious student group leaders might have wanted to take part.) At the first committee meeting, the committee’s chair started us off with the obligatory ice-breaker / “get-to-know-you” exercise: we were going to play the game “Mild, Medium, or Spicy”.

“Mild”, “medium”, and “spicy” were the categories we could choose to guide the questions other committee members might ask us about ourselves. “Mild” might be something like, “Do you have a cat or a dog?” “Medium” would delve a bit deeper, like “Tell me about your first “F” (well, maybe not at Cal). And “Spicy” — I’ll leave that to your imagination, given college students. We began the ice-breaker, and, as it turned out, we went counter-clockwise around the large table . . . and I was seated immediately to the left of the chairman (meaning that I would be last to be questioned). I can’t remember how long the chairman had allotted for the entire exercise, but it was clearly too little! And, of course, everyone else over-spent their allotment. By the time my turn came around, there was about one minute left.
I wasn’t going to let these college students think I was a wimp, so when I was asked, “Mild, Medium or Spicy?”, without missing a beat, I said “Spicy”. Stunned silence followed; clearly no one had any idea what—or courage—to ask a priest-in-collar a question that would fit “spicy”. After a loooong pause, finally, one student spoke up, “So, why are you in the religion ‘biz’ anyway?” That was NOT as “spicy” as I had anticipated, but it also wasn’t easy. I thought for a moment and said, “You expect an answer to that in 30 seconds?” After the laughter subsided, I continued, “I guess it’s because I find it the best way of making meaning of life, and sharing it.” The student looked quizzical for a second, and then nodded. And the rest of the meeting went on as scheduled.

As I mentioned, I’ve repeated that story over and over again in the last couple of decades. On the one hand, it has been a good “teaching” story when working with students (or others) who’ve asked similar questions about my faith journey. It has generally invited further conversation, as I’m often then asked, “Tell me what you mean?” On the other hand, as I tell the story, or as I simply recall it, I am reminded why indeed I’m in the “religion biz”: the stories of my Christian faith do provide the ground upon which I build meaning in life, and which have guided my living it out.

This power of stories to re-create long-ago realities in our minds is what is assumed in our reading from Deuteronomy. The account is set, of course, at the end of the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert. They are about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses charges them, when they have successfully harvested their first crop, to present the first-fruits of their labor to God. And, while doing so, to recall their founding story, to recall how they came to be in the Promised Land, and Who it was that brought them there.

The setting of the reading, however, is not the only time this story was, or is told. The presentation of the first-fruits occurred at all of the so-called “pilgrim festivals”, when Jewish men were to go up to Jerusalem to make their offering. These festivals were Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths, and, when the offerings were made, the story “My father was a wandering Aramaean . . .” was recited. But it wasn’t just an ancient story; it was the story that formed the storyteller into who he was: “My father was a wandering Aramaean, who went down to Egypt . . . The Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on Yahweh, God of our ancestors . . . and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great
terror, and with signs and wonders... and has given us this country. ... Hence, I now bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, Yahweh, have given me.”

The story becomes new and real in the life of the teller. In the presentation of the first-fruits, the offerer becomes a participant in the ancient mystery of Israel’s deliverance by God. And while you’ve perhaps been a guest at a Passover Seder where the Aramaean’s sojourn is retold, this is not a phenomenon limited to Jewish tradition. If you’ve attended Easter Vigils, you might recall the candle-lit drama, and the great, ancient, hymn—the Exsultet—that repeats the line “This is the night...” numerous times, transporting us into the ancient mystery of our deliverance by God. That hymn, as well as the weekly re-telling of the “history of salvation” in every eucharistic prayer, re-establishes who we are in relationship to God.

For us—people of faith—being steeped in our tradition—our scripture and history—provides us with the stories that remind us of who we are, and, if you’ll pardon the play on words, Whose we are. I think that the assumption that this would be the case lies behind Paul’s quotation of another encouraging verse from Deuteronomy: “‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)” (Rm 10.8 // Dt 30.14). The story, the “word”, that we know, can, or should, be so “near” us—“on [our] lips and in [our] hearts”—that it comes to mind effortlessly, and when it might benefit us most.

I have to believe that something like this deep engagement with scripture was what came to Jesus’ rescue in his encounter with the devil. Jesus was out there in that wilderness for forty days and nights and, according to Luke, “he ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished” (4.2). Famished, yes, but I can imagine, also delirious! Who, after such a long period with no food, would be able to think clearly? The devil would have had Jesus right where he wanted him... and no doubt thought he knew the right “temptations” to steer Jesus away from the path that he was undertaking. Whether the devil’s appeal was to Jesus’ clear physical need, or pride, or even through a battle over scripture, however, Jesus’ deep, and internalized, relationship with his sacred stories was what “saved” him. The “word” was so “near” him—in his heart—that it came to his lips. And the devil retreated.

As we step out on our Lenten journey, these lessons challenged us to consider how we engage with our stories, sacred and/or life-altering. What stories, like that of the “wandering Aramaean” bring us back into contact with
our origins as Christians? What stories are so “near” to us that they spring to mind when we are most in need? These stories, whether personal (like my story of “Mild, Medium, or Spicy”) or biblical and/or liturgical (like the eucharistic prayer, or the Exsultet) are the “best of the past”—to use language from Appreciative Inquiry—that we carry with us as we move into an unknown future, into the wilderness.

We all have formative stories. We have them as individuals; we have them as a congregation. And, I must say, we probably also have stories that no longer serve us well, though we are tempted to cling to them. It’s good to recognize these latter stories, recognize them for what they are, and the fact that they ought to be set aside. But, those stories that give us life, that tell us where we’ve triumphed, that remind us who we are, and Whose we are? These ought be our compass, re-orienting us as we seek direction forward. Re-visiting them, whether individually “reading and meditating on God’s holy Word” (BCP, 265), or sitting around metaphorical campfires with each other (in small groups or at coffee) and comparing life-giving experiences, is part of Lent — a solemn, but not necessarily somber, joy that we might share with each other as we face the temptations of the wilderness together.

So what is your “Medium, Mild or Spicy” ice-breaker story? What are your “Wandering Aramaean” stories? What are our “successfully-defeating-the-devil” stories? What do they say about who we are? Equally important, however: how can they nourish us through the lean times of our several wildernesses so that we might become the people God wishes to be?

Amen.