# Celebrate What God Has Done

## A Sermon for Promoting PAR

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### Deuteronomy 26:1‒11 *Common English Bible*

Once you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the Lord your God is giving you, and put it in a basket. Then go to the location the Lord your God selects for his name to reside. Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: “I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.”

The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the Lord your God’s altar. Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God:

“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. So we cried out for help to the Lord, our ancestors’ God. The Lord heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.”

Set the produce before the Lord your God, bowing down before the Lord your God. Then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done for you and your family—each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.

Does your family have any special rituals to mark birthdays or anniversaries or the passage of one year to the next? Sometimes, we recognize these occasions with big celebrations—think midnight on New Year’s Eve. Maybe after an evening of reminiscing on the past year, we greet the new one with a kiss, a toast, and a song. Some part of a birthday, especially if it’s a milestone birthday, might be spent sharing stories and giving thanks for all the blessings of our past. Then we make a wish for the next year as we blow out our candles.

In this story from Deuteronomy, God is offering the Israelites a ritual to both give thanks for the past and look ahead to the future. Finally, after 40 years of wandering in the desert, they have entered the promised land and can begin to put down roots. Once they have become settled enough to produce a harvest, they should bring their early produce to the priest as an offering. After placing it in a basket, they will recite a liturgy that remembers all of God’s goodness and faithfulness to them. The offering is tied to gratitude for the past and faith in God for the future. The people could give their early produce knowing that God would always provide more.

If we were to read further, we would see that the offering is used to feed the most vulnerable so that this new community might be one where all are cared for. There is a spiritual aspect to this offering, as the people are drawn closer to God and the memory of God’s faithfulness, but there is also a practical aspect as God seeks to build a community of generous abundance.

Maybe surprisingly, the Bible does not provide us with a formula for how we should give our offerings. At various times and places, God, Jesus, Paul, and other church leaders invite generosity, but there is no hard and fast amount or frequency of giving. Generally, though, we’re called to offer our gifts joyfully and gratefully. We are also challenged to give regularly and consistently. The idea of giving from our harvest is a helpful metaphor here as it’s something that comes around year after year.

Finally, what *is* clear throughout scripture is that regular generosity is not only good for our communities but also for us. Giving our offerings on a regular basis combats the idea that there isn’t enough and we need to keep what we have to ourselves. Instead, regular giving ensures there is enough for everyone.

It can be a challenge to develop a practice of giving regularly to God’s work through our communities of faith. While we might have a real desire to support our local ministry as well as our collective United Church ministry through Mission and Service, some things get in the way. We may feel the need to “wait and see” each week or each month. What other costs will come up? What if the cost of groceries and housing keeps rising? Some of us go away for several months of the year, and when we’re out of the habit of going to worship, well, our offering is “out of sight, out of mind.” Finally, for those of us who are new to church or just starting to have a regular income, we may simply not know how to work generosity into our regular budget.

These are all important questions to prayerfully consider because they deeply impact our lives of faith. PAR, which stands for Pre-Authorized Remittance, can be one tool, one spiritual practice even, that strengthens not only our generosity but also our life of faith and the overall ministry of our community of faith as we live out God’s calling together. Let me explain.

When we make a commitment to give by PAR, like the ancient Israelites putting their early produce into the basket, we are essentially saying we trust that God will provide for us. In fact, we are so confident of God’s abundant love that we’re going to give back to God even before we know how the month will pan out financially. While this type of giving is automated and removes the tangible aspect of giving, we are invited to make a spiritual practice of giving by PAR. Each month, when you see the amount leave your account, you might recite a prayer of gratitude as the Israelites did: “God, thank you for caring for me and my family in this past month. Not only do we have enough, but we also have enough to share. I don’t know what the next month holds, but I know you will provide what we need. May this offering be used to create a community and world where everyone has enough.”

Just as we do at other times of celebration, perhaps on PAR day, when your offering comes out of your account, you can talk with your family about the past month: Where did we receive a blessing? And consider the future: What needs God’s love and healing this month? How can we help to usher God’s love into the world? You might also read a [Mission and Service story](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/get-involved/mission-and-service/mission-and-service-stories) together to see how your offerings are changing lives around the world.

Consistent giving is a spiritual discipline. Stewardship experts Weems and Michel suggest that giving your resources away is an act of faith. It says you believe you have enough and God will continue to provide for you. When we exercise generosity, we live out our faith. And when we exercise generosity on a regular basis, our faith grows stronger. Giving is one way our hearts more fully reflect God’s own heart.

Friends, I invite you to join me in giving by PAR—either enrolling to give this way for the first time or increasing your monthly donation. We give in this way not because it is simple or easy, but because it represents our gratitude for and faith in a loving, generous God who will do more with our offering than we could dream is possible. Let us celebrate together all the good things God has done for us.