

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 2, 2012
Pentecost 14
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Deuteronomy 4:1-9
Psalm 15
Ephesians 6:10-20
Mark 7:1-23

Our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy this morning finds Moses calling the children of Israel together so that he might give them an important message. The message is this: *Listen carefully to these laws and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you (v.1).*

In order to appreciate this text, and this message from Moses, we need to see it in its wider context.

The word "Deuteronomy" literally means "second law." The book is essentially a series of speeches, or sermons, from Moses to the children of Israel as they are about to enter into the Promised land.

If Deuteronomy means "second law," then of course we naturally would ask about the "first law." You remember that as God was leading the children of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, God instructed Moses to climb up Mount Sinai. While there, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. Beginning in chapter twenty of the book of Exodus, and through the remainder of

that book, God spelled out the exact conditions that were to define the relationship between Himself and this people He had now called unto Himself. The Law, or *Torah* (which means "instruction") was thorough and complete. God thought of everything. These commandments defined Israel's life in relation to God, one another, and the nations around them.

They held the key to all of life. Why? Because they taught about proper worship; they established norms for political, prophetic, and religious leadership. They mandated communal holidays, festivals, and times of rest. They placed limits on the practices of war and vengeance. They ordained a just economy that was built upon caring for widows, orphans, and the poor, and protecting those who were most vulnerable in society. They sanctified labor, meals, and family life.

In all of these ways and more, the Commandments instructed Israel in a life of love. They were the blueprint for a life filled with love for God and for one another. This is why Moses can say, "obey these commandments so that you may *live*." He's talking not merely about the *quantity* of life, but about the *quality* of life. He's talking not merely about marking days on a calendar, but about finding *meaning and significance and purpose* in life.

So then, if God's commandments are so life-giving and so important, why is it necessary here in Deuteronomy for Moses to provide a "second" application? Why does God's life-giving instruction need to be spoken a second time?

Answering this question should bring tears to our eyes, but we need to try.

Return with me to verse 1 and Moses' words. Moses tells the people: *Obey these [commands] so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.*

Moses is speaking in the second person. He speaks of obedience, so that "you" (all) may live, so that "you" (all) may enter the land.

The reason he does so is because Moses is *not* going into the Promised Land with them. Very soon after this, Moses will climb a mountain east of the Jordan River, and from that height he will look out onto the land God is about to give to the people (Deut. 3:27). *And then he will die.* He will not cross the river, he will not enter the land, and the children of the people who marched with him out of Egypt will bury his body in an unmarked grave in the valley of Moab.

Every time I think of this it saddens me. I wonder whether God wasn't rather harsh on Moses. I think about all that Moses did for these people, a people who are often described as a bunch of stiff-necked, rebellious, griping ingrates. I think about the times when God was so angry with these people that He was prepared to snuff them out, and Moses stood in the gap and interceded for them, asking God to give them another chance.

I think about how Moses put up with these characters for **38 years** as they journeyed from Mt. Sinai toward the land of Canaan. And when I see how God

allows Moses to climb a mountain and finally see the land of Promise but *not* enter it, I wonder to myself: Is God being a little harsh here?

Thirty-eight years with these stubborn, self-centered, impatient yahoos. And this is how it ends for Moses?

But therein lies my answer to the question of whether God is being harsh with Moses.

Do you know how long it would take (under normal circumstances) to travel from Mt. Sinai (where God gives the commandments) to the Promised Land? Under normal travel conditions it would take..... 11 days. *Eleven days!*

So how does a two week journey turn into an odyssey of 38 years? For the children of Israel, it happened because not soon after God gave them the Law and began moving them toward Canaan, they began to doubt God's promise. They encounter a series of episodes where their faith falters, and where they outright disobey God's life-giving instruction.

One of those episodes is at a place called Rephidim. The people are struggling, and there is no water. So God instructs Moses to speak to a rock, and promises to produce water from the rock (cf. Numbers 20:8-12).

But even great leaders can suffer a crisis of faith. Somehow, Moses cannot believe that the miracle can occur from the spoken word alone. So instead of speaking to the rock, Moses taps the rock with his staff. The promised water

gushes forth. But Moses, and those who are with him, will not enter the Promised Land. An 11 day journey turns into a 38 year marathon of two steps forward, one step back. An 11 day journey turns into 38 years of doubt, disobedience, struggle, and restoration.

So, we're back to our original question: Why is it necessary for Moses to rehearse God's Law a second time here to a new generation of people?

Moses does so to remind these people that their parents and grandparents died in the wilderness and did not enter the land because in critical moments they chose to reject the life-giving instruction God had given them. In critical moments they chose to go their own way, to act out of their own wisdom. In critical moments, they doubted what God had told them.

Moses tells them that as wonderful as it is that they are about to enter this land flowing with milk and honey, fertile soil and vineyards, and abundant blessing, the truth is that instead of *crossing over* into this reality, they should have been *born* into this good life and should never have known anything else!

Those of you who know me will know that my message to you is constantly the message of God's *unconditional* love to you. I talk constantly about the power of love (both God's and ours) to cover a multitude of sins, to bring healing and hope to our broken lives. I speak frequently about how God's grace and love are such that our sin and brokenness will not have the last word.

And I affirm that today as much as ever.

But the experience of Moses and the children of Israel show us that through our own choices and lack of faith we can sometimes make it harder for God to do His work in our lives. Sometimes we make decisions that leave a trail of brokenness and pain in their wake that could have been avoided! Yes, God can (and does) heal, restore, and make new. *But by God's grace we can also live in such a way that we can bypass much of the pain and sorrow and live directly in the blessing now!*

How can that best happen?

By constantly retelling the story. By constantly recapitulating God's Law as Moses does here for the people. By being baptized into a community where we are committed to telling, retelling, and living this story with one another. By understanding again that God's moral Law is not just a set of bald-faced commands given from a divine authority figure, but comes to us in the context of covenant love from a Creator who knows best how life can be truly meaningful and blessed for us.

So, as often as we can, and in everything we do here, we attempt to tell and live the story. We remind each other from whence we've come, where we are at, and where we are going. We pray for one another and support one another and

hold one another accountable, so that we might be spared wandering around in deserts of our own making.

We take every opportunity to renew the covenant God has made with us.

And such is what we do, every time we partake of the Lord's Supper. In the bread and wine God speaks to us and says, "you are my people, my beloved sons and daughters." And by coming to this table with faith and receiving the grace that is offered to us, we are choosing again the life God offers us. We are joining ourselves with others who've crossed over, who are enjoying the land and its blessings.

So come with faith this morning. Resolve in your heart to walk in God's way, for ultimately, that is the only path that leads to true and abundant life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.