

**Sermon: The Greatest & First**

New North Church, Hingham

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25 October 2020

Based on **Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46**

After working our way through Exodus for the past two months, we suddenly find ourselves at the end of Deuteronomy, reading about the death of Moses. We don't often read from Deuteronomy, but it is one of the four books in Hebrew Scripture that are most often quoted by New Testament writers – 83 times. The other three are Genesis, Isaiah, and Psalms.

Taken as a whole, Deuteronomy talks about the meaning of the nation living an independent life of faith. A Bible scholar named Henry Shives calls Deuteronomy 'the final appendix' to the five books called the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah. At this point, the wandering is almost over; the people have grown into a nation; and they are about to cross into the Promised Land.

By all the recent readings from Exodus and Matthew, the lectionary meant to prompt us to ask lots of questions about our own faith life.

For example, what is the meaning of God's actions in saving, preserving, and guiding a *chosen people* who didn't always merit or deserve God's grace? What might that mean for us, a nation of individuals who tend to go our own way in almost every way? Exodus is about God and Moses making a faithful nation out of a bunch of stiff-necked ex-slaves. Does that apply to us? Or should we think of ourselves as our own individual 'nations,' so to speak, going through all the same wandering, complaining, and repenting as the ancient Israelites did for a full generation?

What is the meaning of the covenant and the revelation of God's will in it? Would we have come up with the Commandments on our own? Most of our current law code is based on the 'ten words' spoken to Moses by God. Absent that, where would we be today? Better or worse?

The Israelites faced temptations in the wilderness and will face many more in the Promised Land. What tempts us to stray from God and covenant in our time and place?

Every Sunday, our readings tend to raise more questions than they answer; it's all food for thought. But the biggest question for me in today's reading is this: Why could Moses not cross over into Canaan? It's the *Promised Land*, right? And of all the people, Moses surely did the most to get them to this point. After all the wandering and the complaining and the hard times, it was Moses who kept the people together, so it would be natural to expect a better ending for him.

God directs Moses to go from the steppes of Moab, which are way down low, to the top of Mount Nebo, about 2600 feet up. We see the influence of the editors, who added the summit of Pisgah, which is nearby. In any event, Moses didn't *see* the Promised Land as much as the Lord *showed* it to him, in a panoramic view available only from a great height. What Moses saw – from the Mediterranean way out west to the ground under his feet – were the very detailed boundaries of Canaan, one little tiny piece of the world promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our spiritual ancestors.

But Moses died then and there, a great honor, actually, as it was at the Lord's command and Moses was apparently in robust good health after 120 years. It was God who cared for Moses' body personally, a sign of God's love for his friend.

So, again: why was Moses denied entry into Canaan?

We are tempted to say, 'well, it's complicated,' but it is.

There was that time when there was no water for the congregation and the people quarreled with Moses, saying, 'Why did you bring us into the wilderness just to let us die of thirst?' The incident is recorded in Numbers, chapter 20.

Moses and Aaron got down on their knees before God and prayed for help. 'The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and speak to that rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock' (Numbers 20:7-8).

'So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall *we* bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted up his hand and *struck* the rock *twice* with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not

trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Numbers 20:9-12).

Moses and Aaron had failed in two ways: first, Moses did not speak to the rock as God said to do – he *struck* it, twice, with his staff – and, secondly, they did not give God credit for this miracle.

Later, in Numbers 27, ‘The Lord said to Moses, “Go up this mountain of the Abarim range, and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled with me. You did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters.” (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)’ (Numbers 27:12-14)

This is the only explanation given for Moses not crossing into the Promised Land. He lost his temper with the people and took credit for something that God had done for them. In that one moment, maybe Moses wasn’t loving the Lord his God or his neighbor as well as he should have. No one knows his burial place; there is no grave or marker, only his work remains.

We’re learning that love of God and love of neighbor means everything. In Matthew’s Gospel today, a lawyer – one learned in the Torah and the commandments, thank you, Moses – asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest. You would think he would know already, so we know this question is a trap, another test for Jesus. So, Jesus tells him, as we heard. On these two commandments hang all the law *and the prophets*. Everything learned from Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah – all the prophets up to and including Jesus hangs on those two commandments.

Matthew is also interested in revealing the identity of the Messiah, and the second part of today’s passage is about that. Having established the greatest commandment as being love the Lord your God, Jesus next asks the question, who is Lord?

In typical fashion, he asks, “What do you think?” Matthew’s listeners would know that Jesus is a direct descendant of King David from the genealogy in chapter one, but would they also know him as Son of God, as Jesus implies by quoting from Psalm 110, because it is the Messiah who sits at God’s right hand?

To follow the Messiah means to follow someone who will serve the universal mission – all the people, all the nations.

God’s purposes are larger than any one people or group. Even David knew that God’s Messiah was Lord of all. Love of God and love of neighbor are therefore more than just the two greatest commandments; they are God’s will for everyone.

And why might that be? A few weeks ago, we spoke about how people don’t always like being told what to do. But Deuteronomy is a gold mine of wisdom and revelation. In chapter 10, Moses tells us what God requires of us and why:

“So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to *fear* the Lord your God, to *walk* in all his ways, to *love* him, to *serve* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to *keep* the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, *for your own well-being*” (10:12-13).

Like any good parent, God tells us to behave because it’s for our own good.

Sometimes Scripture provides answers to difficult questions. Other times, Scripture just opens up a new can of questions for us to think about and to try to answer. And then, sometimes, God slams the door on Scripture, saying, “It’s simple – do this and this and you’re good to go.”

All we need to figure out, then, is how to best love God and neighbor. Everything else is just details.

Amen.

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