

We begin today with our reading from Deuteronomy. Remember with me that this book - the fifth book of the bible and the last of those five books that make up the Torah, are the last words of Moses to the Israelites. With Moses, they had escaped from Egypt across the Red Sea. They had received the law at Mount Sinai, and they had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, provided for by God. And here they stand, on the banks of the Jordan, listening to Moses, anxious to cross the river and enter the promised land.

It was the long awaited destination of their journey as a people. God had long ago promised this land to Abraham, saying "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,... so that you will be a blessing... In you," God had promised, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12: 2-3). But Moses now spoke to them as though that blessedness was far from the sure thing they had hoped it would be. For the central message of Deuteronomy is summed up in our reading today:

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God... then you shall live... and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away... to bow down to other gods and serve them,... you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life... that you may live, loving the Lord your God. (Deut 30:16-20)

This summer, I have been searching for something. Thinking about this move we've now made into a church that belongs to a different denomination, thinking about the land not far from here where we are building a new church, the place where we hope to have and build a future, I've been searching for a way to describe it all. Specifically, I've been looking for a story in the bible, the story we are actually living in this time. For truly, one thing about the scriptures that makes them special is that, as old as these books and stories are, we can see our own lives reflected in its pages. So where have I found the best reflection of our life together as a church?

There are a great many stories to choose from, of course.

The story of Abraham and Sarah, their descendants, and the promises of God that were passed down generation to generation. Or the story of Joseph, sold into slavery but made a blessing to Egypt in a time of draught. Generations later, the Assyrian and Babylonian empires that took the Israelites from that promised land into exile, and the return home of the Israelites. Or perhaps even the central story for us, the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the story of the disciples taking up their call to follow him.

All important stories, but none seemed to stick. Or rather, one story stood above the rest in the way it resembled the life of Messiah in these last months and years. And that is the story of Moses and the Israelites. Not the whole story granted, but perhaps from the time when the law was given by God at Sinai and the people began their wandering in a foreign land. All the way, perhaps, to this time, poised as a people on the banks of an irrigation ditch nearly ready to cross over to a promised land - a land flowing with milk and honey and promise - ready to enter and possess it.

This story seems to fit well, right? Do you hear the resemblances? Do you see us and our own sojourn in this story? We see the broad strokes and know some of the details too: The snakes in the wilderness that bite the people and the fashioning of a bronze snake on a pole that, once looked upon, the people live; The divine provision of manna in the morning, pigeon in the evening, and water from a rock. The care and attention of God to this people on their long sojourn is a comfort, and I imagine even some of these smaller stories resonate with the story of this congregation.

Unfortunately, there are more resemblances than these. This story carries us face to face with a truth that is both uncomfortable and necessary to acknowledge. It's a truth that we don't want to look at too closely, but one from which we must not turn away. It's the part of the story that has been used in the history of this country to justify the seizure of land through the deliberate and cunning methods of government and the Church. The story of what comes next, the story of Canaan, is the story of how the "promised land" was wrested from those who originally inhabited it.

Of course, it's the story of our ancestors. It's not our story or the story of any of us in this room. But it's also our story, written in this book we hold sacred and central in our life of faith as a Christian community. It's a story we have inherited, a story we need to reckon with.

For now, in a sense, we remain on the banks of the Jordan, listening for God's word to us in these stories. For now, even as building has commenced and continues, we have time for such wrestling, such reckoning. Who better to help us than the one who calls us to these mighty tasks. So we turn now to our gospel reading.

Not a simple reading of Jesus' words to a crowd. "Only those who hate those they love, even 'life itself,' and give up all their possessions, can be my disciples." Whatever happened to the love of God and neighbor? Jesus is obviously talking here about something different. He is speaking to the crowd of carrying the cross and following him - of being disciples.

The builder and the King, both prudent, careful, and measured decision makers. One takes account of the cost before taking on a project to make sure he can finish it. The other considers his resources before running into battle with a more powerful adversary. Not bad ways of making decisions, saving themselves ridicule and defeat. So what is Jesus saying and what has it to do with hating loved ones?

I think Jesus is talking about all that holds us back. He's speaking of the things that keep us from picking up that cross and following. **Consideration** of who we are based on our families, the people we come from - we don't want to be alienated from our people, those who ground us in our identity. **Taking account** of whether it is wise or prudent to take up that cross - what might we lose or have to put down in the process? Jesus here is taking aim at the measured way we step into discipleship. He knows that once that cross is taken up and those first steps down the path are taken, there is no turning back. To take up that cross, he knows, is to lay aside those things by which we measure the risk against the loss. **To take up that cross and follow him is to unmoor ourselves from who we thought we were, but it results in finding ourselves more completely on the path down which he leads.**

We have a task, beloved. We are walking in the footsteps of a story and a history that have cost and continue to cause enormous suffering, for both people and the land taken from them. We have inherited these stories and histories and are called by Jesus to take them up, to go “all in” - to reckon, to wrestle; to let go of those things that ground us securely in the identities we like, and to step down an unfamiliar path in faith - a path that will bring us into the very clutches of death itself. But not only death.

For death is not the end of Jesus’ story. Nor is it the end of ours. Because of the path Jesus walked and the place that path led him, we need not fear death - whether the death of body, or the death of identity, the release of stories we tell ourselves about who we come from and who we are. Jesus beckons us to put down our assessment of the risk, to lay aside our careful measures for success and failure, and to take up that cross, to follow him.

We sit now on the banks of that irrigation ditch, Messiah, discerning the choice being put at our feet. We can cross over and enter that land willfully blind to its story, its history, how it came to be ours. Or we can take up the cross toward which Jesus beckons, begs, and follow him into that land, eyes and hearts open to its truths. One way leads to a kind of death, but the other promises to be a journey that will remake you, that will change you, and that will lead us together into new life - as individuals and a people. “But beloved,” he says, “walk this way. And be not afraid.”

AMEN

It ain't going to be easy...

The work: loving the lord, walking in his ways, observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances...

...bless you in the land that you are entering to possess...

But... if your heart turns away and you do not hear, are led astray, bow down before other gods and serve them. You Shall Perish.

I have set before you *CHOICE*. CHOOSE LIFE!

...holding fast to the Lord = life, length of days

This isn't hypothetical

Source of delight - the law of the Lord (Meditate on it day and night)

Trees planted by streams of water - yield fruit, never wither

The way of the wicked will perish

...all our works - begun, continued, and ended in you. PoD

I could command your duty but I'd rather appeal to you through love
receive him not as a slave but as a beloved brother

(see him differently)

Refresh my heart in Christ!

Give up all your possessions (that which possesses you?) All our possessions.

What is it that holds us back? Careful, weighing risk of failure/reward

Give up what you have - that which gives sense of security...

To carry the cross is to go "all in" - foolishly, without a safety net.

To know your fate and to carry it, following anyway...

Connection between carrying the cross and hating one's people.

Estimate the cost: family

What will it mean to finish?

These seem like prudent ideas - best practices for builders and kings.
What of this business concerning hating one's family, one's life.
All has something to do with security, certainty of the 'right' choice.

I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses.
Obeying the commandments is life.
Like trees planted by streams of water.

The thing that afflicts us, we look upon, and it saves us.
The bronze snake on the pole.
Jesus on the cross.
Gill Bailey and René Girard