

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye to Canaan’s fair and happy land where my possessions lie.” Although it’s not in our Chalice Hymnal or even in our Hymnal Supplement, I felt the need for us to sing that song this morning. To me, it captures the story of the last verses of our Scripture passage this morning, as we hear Moses make one last appeal to God to be allowed to accompany the Children of Israel into the Promised Land. But I think it also captures the feelings of many of us this morning, as we stand at what we hope is the tail end of the journey through the pandemic, peering into the future. Is post-COVID Lynnwood our Promised Land? What can we expect on t’other side of our temporal Jordan? What awaits Good Shepherd Baptist Church in the future? Can we, like Moses, rest content in preparing the path for others to follow as they reap the rewards we have sown?

Before we get to those questions, let’s poke around a little bit at the scriptural context for this morning’s story. The Book of Deuteronomy is a peculiar fifth entry in the Torah, the legendary history of humankind, of Israel, and the Law given to Moses by God. Much of Deuteronomy retells Books 2, 3, and 4 of Torah: Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, with stories of the wanderings of Israel and recapitulations of the Law. Internally, this is explained in that it is set as a sort of farewell address by Moses to the people. He is reminding them, before he lays down the burden of leadership, where they have been together and what he has taught them about the will of God. Externally to Deuteronomy, but still in the Old Testament, we also have the story in II Kings 22-23, of a lost book of the Law being rediscovered in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah, and the religious reforms he instituted as a result, all of which match specific instructions called out by Moses in Deuteronomy. Externally to Scripture, we have the scholarly theory that Deuteronomy was a late addition to Torah by an author or editor scholars call “the Deuteronomist.” Those of you who’ve studied Genesis may remember the “documentary hypothesis,” that the Five Books of Moses were actually written or edited by four different schools, of which “D,” the Deuteronomist was one. All of these different ideas are summed up in the Greek title which the Book bears: Deuteronomy, or “Second Law.” It is not second in the sense of being a replacement for the first but in the sense of being a faithful restatement.

We pick up in this “second telling” approximately where we left off in Numbers last week. You’ll remember that the story of Balaam ultimately ends with his death as an enemy of the people he had previously blessed, a casualty of the campaign of Joshua and the Hebrew army in the lands east of the River Jordan. Those conquered lands are then assigned by Moses as the new homes of the tribes of Reuben and Gad. They are delighted with this outcome and, as Numbers records but Deuteronomy does not, tell Moses, “Thank you” and suggest that they’ll just stay put here with all their flocks and families and let the other ten tribes go on to conquer the land west of the Jordan. Moses disagrees. “Although the Lord your God has given you this land to occupy, all your troops shall cross over armed as the vanguard of your Israelite kin. Only your wives, your children, and your livestock—I know that you have much livestock—shall stay behind in the towns that I have given to you. When the Lord gives rest to your kindred, as to you, and they too have occupied the land that the Lord your God is giving them beyond the Jordan, then each of you may return to the property that I have given to you.”

The Reubenites and Gadites are displaying an attitude that is, alas, all too familiar to us in the U.S. of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “We got ours, we don’t care who else gets what they want.” Just as with the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” crowd of our time, the Transjordanian tribes

have conveniently forgotten that the other ten tribes also fought and died to conquer the eastern portion of the Promised Land. Their desire to pull their troops from the combined Hebrew armies is a purely selfish impulse rightly squashed by Moses. Would that more attention was paid to Moses' picture of how a society blessed by God actually works. Until everyone is secure, no one is secure.

Moses then gives Joshua his marching orders. Although I've already mentioned Joshua this morning, perhaps a little refresher would be a good idea here, too. Three weeks ago, I told the story from Numbers 13, when Moses sent one spy from each tribe across the Jordan to reconnoiter the Promised Land. All but two came back with fearful reports of unbeatable giants in the land. But Caleb, you may remember, said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." Joining him in that minority report was Joshua, son of Nun. But while Caleb is remembered only for that one moment of glory, Joshua has been a recurring character in the story of the Children of Israel. We first hear of him in Exodus 17, when Moses appoints him as the leader of the army sent out against Amalek and his troops. Joshua leads the Hebrew army well, but the Children of Israel only prevail while Moses holds his arms up in an attitude of prayer. Eventually, to secure the victory, Aaron and Hur have to support Moses' weary arms. A few chapters later, in Exodus 24, we learn that Joshua has also become Moses' spiritual assistant, his "associate pastor," if you will. He accompanies Moses most of the way up Mount Sinai when the older man receives the Law from God. In Exodus 33, we are told that Joshua continually keeps guard over the "tent of meeting," where Moses speaks to God face-to-face. Then, in Numbers 27, Joshua is appointed as Moses' successor: "Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, 'Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.' So, the LORD said to Moses, 'Take Joshua, son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him; have him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. You shall give him some of your authority, so that all the congregation of the Israelites may obey. But he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him... before the LORD; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the Israelites with him, the whole congregation.'"

In this passage, Moses' orders to Joshua are short and to the point: "Your own eyes have seen everything that the Lord your God has done to these two kings (the ones they've just defeated); so the Lord will do to all the kingdoms into which you are about to cross. Do not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you." Joshua really doesn't need much encouragement. He's already proven himself as a worthy successor to Moses, both as a spiritual leader when paired with Eleazar the priest, as Moses was paired with Aaron, and as a leader of the army. All Moses needs to do is give the younger man a pat on the back and he's ready to go.

Finally, in this passage, Moses turns to his own situation. He has been told by God that he will not be allowed to accompany the Israelites into the Promised Land. The reasons aren't specified in this passage, but we've encountered them before. I don't expect you to remember, because I nearly didn't myself, but in December of 2018, I preached from Numbers 20, the incident of the water at Meribah. In that story, Moses loses his temper with the Children of Israel who have been, as usual, complaining. God gives Moses instructions for how to provide fresh water for his

flock but Moses lambasts the murmurers and, instead of showing them his staff to remind them how God has provided for them before, uses it to strike the rock to produce water, in the process taking credit for the water produced. It is disobedience and it is a failure of leadership. As I noted in that sermon, “Moses failed in his leadership of God’s people by venting his anger at them when what they really needed were words of peace. The people were grieving and frightened and Moses failed to comfort them.”

In his commentary on Deuteronomy for the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, Mark Biddle notes that, while Numbers specifically connects the Meribah story with God’s banning Moses from the Promised Land, Deuteronomy does not. “Deuteronomy,” he writes, “seems to suggest that God holds Moses, as Israel’s leader, responsible in some sense for his people’s failures: like priest like people.” But regardless of the reason, the story is clear in both books that Moses, despite his plea, will not be allowed to cross the river. In this regard, Biddle points out, he is not unlike other Old Testament figures: “Moses is not alone among biblical heroes. Abraham answered God’s call only to learn later that God planned to fulfill the promise by giving the land—not, after all, to Abraham—but to his descendants four hundred years later! God called the prophet Isaiah to a ministry of preaching to a people who would not heed his message. He was called to fail! His words were to be committed to writing to serve as a testimony to subsequent generations he would never know. Abraham and Isaiah were called upon to trust that, because “the word of YHWH does not return void,” some future generation would benefit from their obedience to the call of God.”

Like Abraham and Isaiah, Moses remains faithful to God who has told him that the blessing he has worked for will not be manifest to him but to those in the future. Under God’s direction, he has prevented the defection of Reuben and Gad and has continued to train Joshua to take over for him. The rest of the Book of Deuteronomy is, essentially, the working out of Moses’ faithful response to this disappointment. David Guzik, who writes Biblical commentaries for two websites, points to the heart of the story: “It was probably easy for Moses to have a bad attitude here – ‘well, if I’m not going into the Promised Land, I’m sure not going to knock myself out training my replacement.’ But that was not the heart of Moses – he would do everything he could to love the people, prepare them to go in, and to make Joshua a success. A man of God would not do it any other way... Moses had the heart of a true shepherd. He knew that his ministry was not centered on himself and his own satisfaction, but on God and (God’s) people.”

God says to Moses, “Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see.” In reading those words this week, I could not help but think of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On the night before he was assassinated, at a rally for striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Dr. King offered these memorable words: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!” Rev. Dr. King truly walked in

the steps of Moses and of Abraham and of Isaiah. But we must remember that the blessing of the Promised Land has not yet come those to whom Dr. King spoke.

Despite his own disappointment, Moses continued to work for the future, just as he insisted that the tribes of Reuben and Gad should set aside their gains and work for the gains of the whole people. And how about us? As we reach toward the end of the pandemic and begin to see the promised growth of our town around the anticipated arrival of light rail, are we still showing ourselves as willing to work for the future and in encouraging others to do the same? For the last several years, we've been talking about the possibilities for Good Shepherd Baptist Church as Lynnwood experiences the predicted boom in population and business that the new transit hub will bring. We've been standing on tiptoe, craning our necks, struggling to see the Promised Land from our vantage point. But now, we can see it from here. New apartment buildings and mixed-use developments are shooting up. Our sister, Brenda Hokkanen, has already moved into one of those new buildings. Thousands of others will follow.

We have pledged, again today, to work for the good of our community. We sing it every week: "Bless now, O God, these gifts we give, That others may in your peace live." Do we really mean that, or are we just making sure that the lights stay on for when we want to use our building again? I think I know the answer, actually, because after 16 years, I think I know this congregation pretty well. After all, you've never really charged our neighbors for the use of our gardens, just enough to cover the water they use. And we don't charge rent to the residents of Shepherd's Village, we just ask the Foundation to cover our additional electricity costs. And, of course, you all approved the donation of at least a million dollars-worth of land for Shepherd's Garden.

In what other ways are we being obedient to God's call to work for the future? Are we encouraging each other to hang in there and not to bail out before reinforcements arrive? Are we training our successors? Obviously, many along the way have done a good job with this. After all, in this year that we celebrate our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation, we have only two charter members still active at Good Shepherd. But we must reckon with how many of us, yes, me, too, are feeling a bit weary after this past year and a half of COVID measures. The nominating committee has been making their calls this month to prepare a deacon board for next year. If they called you, did you say, "yes?"

My sisters and my brothers, I continue to be convinced that Good Shepherd Baptist Church still has a significant role to play in the spiritual development of South Snohomish County. Of those new neighbors who are coming to our city, some will be looking for a place to worship God. They will be looking for a place that they can call their spiritual home, a place where they and their children will feel loved and validated. They are coming from all over the Americas, all over the earth. They are coming as singles, as same and opposite sex couples, as families. They will change us just as we change them. And that will be a great blessing. God will bring them to us. God will bring us the changes that we need. "I want you to know, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, (this morning). I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!" Thanks be to God! Amen.