

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20
Matthew 5: 33-37
February 16, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

When Moses utters the words we just heard he is in a state of personal crisis. He has led two generations of the people of Israel through the wilderness. It has been forty years of hard traveling. Yes there have been amazing moments of revelation. But there have also been devastating times of disease, death, rebellion and war. But most of the time it has been the daily trudging through the wilderness, a land without landmarks fed by a white floury substance called manna. The word manna literally means "what is it?" This is appropriate for the wilderness journey. When we wander through desolate places where there is no obvious progress toward a goal it is often not clear what it is that sustains us.

More deeply, Moses and the Israelites are in a spiritual wilderness. They have been liberated from slavery with the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey at the end of the journey. Yet here they are in a barren landscape with no evidence that there really is such a place. Throughout the journey there have been complaints and a romancing of the life they have left. Was it really that bad? When belief in promise fades the past always takes on a rosy glow no matter how terrible it may have been.

Given the choice human beings tend to choose oppressive security to liberated uncertainty. We lose sight that it is this prolonged experience of freedom with all of its uncertainties and shades of gray that gives birth to new life. It is the wilderness journey that strips away all of the false expectations of life, of ourselves and others and bring us to naked honesty. We come to understand that the promise lies in the moment. It is not a destination or

a reward. It is something given in the here and now. It is the wilderness where we discover that, in the words of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, “if we had to go somewhere else to find it, we never had it to begin with.” Said differently, if we don’t find the promise fulfilled in the here and now we will never find it anywhere else.

This forms a deep dimension of Moses’ pain as he addresses the Israelites. He has believed in the promise. He has trusted God in the wilderness. He has led God’s people through the long, wearisome journey and *now.... Now* he has stood on Mt. Nebo. He has gazed at the green fertile land and knows that at last the people have arrived. They will enter this land which they were liberated in order to possess. Only a handful of the people who experienced the Passover event are still alive. Moses’ brother Aaron is dead. The great exodus is for the vast majority a second hand memory created and sustained by ritual.

And yet for all this, Moses is not permitted to enter this new life, this new land with the people who he has led for so long. Here lies his anguish: Moses has carried the promise alive for forty years. He has trusted God to be faithful. He has dreamed of the joy of entering this land of promise and reaping some of the reward for his faithfulness and hard work. Yet God has decided that Moses will not go. He will glimpse the land from afar and die in an unmarked grave. Meanwhile the people who have no real understanding of what this journey has been about, many of whom will forget the journey and receive the prosperity as the new normal which they deserve—these are the ones who will enter in the promised land of Canaan.

Why is this important to understand? We so often hear words of scripture and doctrine—things we *should* believe in order to be good Christians. We subject scripture to intellectual analysis like a cadaver on a post-mortem gurney. We sift it for what we believe and

what we do not believe as if the entire Bible is simply a collection of ideas with which we agree or disagree. Like there cadaver there is no life, only items for analysis. We completely miss the fact that the Bible literally crackles with energy of God which is not found in any one verse word or story. Which is why we must stop subjecting scripture to cold intellectual analysis and bring it into the complex patterns and textures of the fabric of our lives where what is human meets the love of the Creator of the universe.

I carry on like this because I want you to get the fact that when Moses speaks these words he is not just giving instructions, rules to be followed for the leading of a good life. His words come from the passionate agony of his being denied what everyone else is receiving. He knows more keenly that words can say what this entry into the land of Canaan represents. He alone has been on the entire journey of Israel's redemption. He has seen and experienced what happens when the people have chosen fear and self-will over trust in God. He has watched the community he has worked so hard to build fall apart under an avalanche of complaints and rebellion. He suspects, no, he *knows*, that none of this will change. Being in a land of prosperity will not change people's hearts. Indeed he suspects—knows—that there is nothing like prosperity and comfort to sabotage true dependence on God. He suspects that they will soon worship the god of prosperity just as they romantically remembered what they called “the fleshpots of Egypt.”

Moses will not be there to lead them. This realization hurts more than anything else.

It is in this setting that Moses speaks:

Behold, I have set before you this day, life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the lord your God...by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and obeying his commandments...then you shall live...the Lord will

bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray and worship other gods and serve them you shall perish.

Friends this is no detached presentation of facts. Moses feels at the deepest level of his being the joy of a daily life of trusting God and the adversity and suffering of living for pretended benefits of false idols. Moses can anticipate the sorrows that will come to his people when they forget the Lord their God and live in the land as their entitlement. He feels them. And so with all the love and urgency he can muster he pleads with them to “choose life”—that is the *true* life that comes from a loving daily walk with God, being satisfied with his presence and allowing all blessings to unfold from that daily walk.

As the scriptures record Moses’ worst fears would be realized. The people would forget, over and over again, with disastrous consequences. Over and over God will send leaders to call them back, but the joy and peace never last. And so God sends a new Moses whose words called the Sermon on the Mount recall both the Law given from Mt. Sinai and from Mt. Nebo. Jesus comes at the Law from a radically different approach: *don’t promise what you will do; just do it. People will appreciate it and are smart enough to figure out your good intention.* But with Moses his yearning is the same: *choose life!* Don’t seek what the next recession can take away. Don’t build the foundation of your life on the sand of worldly promises. Choose the life that really is life. And Jesus says, “Look, I’ll make it really simple for you. Just follow me. *I am the way the truth and the life.* Choose me. Choose the life I led. Value what I value. Care for the people and issues I care about. Trust God to provide everything you need. Receive a peace which the world cannot give.

Don't promise to follow me. Choose today simply *to do it*. I will give you the grace to fulfill your intention. Having decided to follow me, you will. It will be that simple. Amen.