

“AT THE EDGE OF OUR GRAVE: A NEW BEGINNING” First Week of Lent

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Let us pray. Amazing God, your tender love creates us, chooses us, and shapes us to be an expression of your love for all the earth. Grant us renewed courage this day so we may hear your word and so be transformed. Then may we love one another as you love us and enter that land of hope to which you call us. **And the people of God say together, AMEN.**

READ TEXT(S): **DEUTERONOMY 7:6 – 9** (*The Message*)

(This chapter begins with verses 1 – 5 which warn Israel not to make covenants with or worship the gods of those who currently occupy the land God will give them. There is harshness in these verses, but in essence, they seek to remind ancient Israel—and us—that our identity does not come from the culture around us or from the empire. Our text for today then begins at verse 6).

“Do this because you are a people set apart as holy to God, your God. God, your God, chose you out of all the people on Earth for himself as a cherished, personal treasure.

God wasn’t attracted to you and didn’t choose you because you were big and important—the fact is, there was almost nothing to you. He did it out of sheer love, keeping the promise he made to your ancestors. God stepped in and mightily bought you back out of that world of slavery, freed you from the iron grip of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know this: God, your God, is God indeed, a God you can depend upon. He keeps his covenant of loyal love with those who love him and observe his commandments for a thousand generations. [But he also pays back those who hate him, pays them the wages of death; he isn’t slow to pay them off—those who hate him, he pays right on time.”]

INTRODUCTION: For months now the Presbytery of Wabash Valley, as it gathers in small and large groups, to do its work has asked:

“What is God calling us to be and do as a presbytery? What is God calling us to be and do as a community of faith communities?”

Periodically every organization and/or faith entity must step back from its business-as-usual and reassess who it is and what it is seeking to do. In her work, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle says this reassessment happens in Christianity as well as other faith traditions about every 500 years. Tickle says, “Every 500 years the church cleans out its attic and has a giant garage sale.” This process of cleaning out our attics is a way of sorting through—out of all the baggage we have gathered along the way—what is vital to keep and what we must let go of in order to journey forward.

Sheryl and I have had that experience of sorting through the baggage we have. Almost ten years ago when I began to serve as intentional interim, Sheryl and I owned a house we built on ten acres of land. We discovered, when we came to sell that property how many things were in that house! Many of us know that experience when you found it necessary to sort through the homes and possessions of our parents after their deaths. Many of us have at one time or another found it necessary to sort through our

own personal belongings and found—in amazement—how much baggage we gather up along the journey. We wonder where did this come from and why is it here? Perhaps we even wonder who put this here, for surely we did not bring this baggage along!

I, along with many of us, believe as does Phyllis Tickle, the church finds itself today in a perfect storm of chaos and change with lots of baggage from our journey. We find ourselves in a perfect storm of influences that have impacted us for at least twenty—perhaps even thirty—of the past years. Many of these influences have been so subtle we no longer even recognize how significant they have been in the life of the church.

Walter Brueggeman says, “when the world is exhausted, when our imagination fails, when our lives shut down in despair” (“A New World Birthed”) it is time to reassess what’s important, to ask some hard questions about our journey and what baggage we carry with us. What is vital for the journey and what do we need to leave behind?

However, in our own Christian tradition there are other occasions—less dramatic perhaps—when we also step back and ask life and death questions. I expect most of us here today gathered last Wednesday evening for Ash Wednesday. With the imposition of ashes and ancient words we repeat in our burial of the dead—“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes”—we sought to clarify our priorities, to remember our Creator and Redeemer, and to practice with fresh awareness our faith as we journey through the season of Lent.

Once you kneel at the edge of your own grave and look into the dark earth of dust and ashes, you have new eyes with which to see the world and a new heart with which to love that which is most important in life. Throughout the ages men and women of faith have understood once we truly face death and the loss of all we hold dear, we have nothing left to fear.

After the recent tragedy that struck Haiti, we first witnessed and then asked, “How could so many of the Haitian people—still suffering such death and pain—gather in the streets, raise their voices in song and praise even before their tears were dry? How could they?” When we experience first-hand the fragility of life and how quickly it can all disappear, we rejoice and celebrate the precious gifts we have.

I. MOSES PROCLAIMS GOD’S CALL FOR A HOLY PEOPLE

That’s the reason this text from Deuteronomy is so important for us today. The whole of Deuteronomy is itself such a reassessment of the law God gave to Moses years earlier at Mt. Sinai. Sometimes when we come to the Book of Deuteronomy with its title “The Second Law,” we skip over it. We’ve already read about the giving of the Law in an earlier Old Testament book. However, that’s a major mistake!

The Book of Deuteronomy is not a second law or a giving of the law repeated a second time. Rather it is a proclamation of that law God gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It is, in fact, a series of sermons gathered together that proclaim mightily what God’s Law looks like for a new day, in a new world, for a new generation. Patrick Miller reminds us that “no book of the Bible manifests a greater concern for the transmission of the faith to the next generation” than does Deuteronomy (*Interpretation*, p. viii).

That's why it is such an appropriate book for us to be reading and learning about this day when we struggle so much with that issue of how do we connect with a younger generation. What one thing do I want to write on the hearts of my children and grandchildren to guide them in faithful living?

Deuteronomy wrestles with the issues of past and present, how to respect the ancient tradition and yet address the needs of the contemporary generation, how to affirm God's revelation and yet take the risk of interpreting that Word for a new day ("Introduction to Deuteronomy," *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 240). I think many of us and our congregations fear taking that risk of interpretation, and yet, it is vital.

Deuteronomy contains proclamation and teaching, written probably in the 7th and 8th centuries, BCE. This core of teaching was gathered together to speak to a new generation. That community of faith, out of its great tradition employs the key figure of Moses to connect back to that ancient tradition and speak for it.

At a critical time in the life of Israel (probably now only the southern kingdom of Judah since the northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians, 722 BCE; 2 Kings 17), Israel is invited to step back and reassess its life, its priorities, its practice of faith. In what Eugene Peterson calls "one of the longest sermons in the Bible, and maybe the longest sermons ever," Deuteronomy is a book of incredible grace and love. We need to rediscover it.

Deuteronomy presents the old warrior, Moses, standing on the Plains of Moab with the congregation of Israel gathered before him. And Moses preaches this sermon—his last sermon. Actually Deuteronomy contains a series of sermons in which he powerfully interprets the meaning of God's covenant for a new generation.

I want you to think about this; I have thought about it a lot! Moses has led this congregation through a 40-year interim! I don't know about you, but that gives me real pause. We complain about a 2 or 3 year interim experience! With precise interim skill, Moses seeks to help his congregation (1) come to terms with their own history—all forty years of it! He invites them to (2) recognize the shifts in power as leaders change, (3) instructs them about their covenant with God. It is a very personal covenant, for over and over the words repeat: "The Lord, your God," or "God, your God." Depending on which translation you read, twelve to fifteen times in this chapter alone we find these words. This is not a God remote, or a God who desires only blind obedience to a written law. (4) Moses seeks to prepare this congregation for a new direction and a new leader. Finally, (5) at the heart of his interim teaching is his proclamation of a new identity and a new mission. Listen again to our text (from the NRSV):

"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God;
The Lord your God has chosen you
out of all the peoples on earth
to be his people, his treasured possession."

I love the way Frederick Buechner translates this last phrase, "treasured possession." He says "my *segullah*, my precious ones, my darlings" (in Mike Graves' *The Sermon as Symphony*, p. 190). Wow! Let's not talk about the Old Testament as something different than what we discover in Jesus Christ our Lord, for it is not.

II. WHAT LOOKS LIKE THE END IS REALLY A BEGINNING!

On this occasion Moses kneels at the edge of his own grave. He knows his end is near. “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.” Following this sermon Moses goes up to Mount Pisgah and dies. This is the end of a long journey for the people of Israel in response to God’s call for a holy and chosen people. And yet, I believe what we discover in the Book of Deuteronomy in the proclamation of Moses is not simply an ending. There we discover what appears to be the end is, in fact, a new beginning.

T.S. Elliot wrote:

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
. . . A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)”

We grow weary of the journey, do we not? We get weary of fighting the same battles over and over. We get weary of not knowing exactly what it is God wants us to do, or just not knowing how to do it. We get weary of listening to the old stories we have heard again and again—the stories of conflict and pain, the stories of woundedness and distrust.

But today I want you to know how far you have come on your journey as the Presbytery of Wabash Valley and as the people of God. We do come toward our end. For the end is near in the Presbytery of Wabash Valley for me to serve you as your Interim General Presbyter. It is not my intention to go up to a mountain and die, but my time with you will be ending no later than May 31.

That time becomes a reality for about two and a half weeks ago Sheryl and I put our home on the market. We expected, given the economic climate, we might have difficulty selling our home in order for us to relocate. In two weeks time we had seven showings. Our realtor said, “You must be doing lots of praying!” She said, “Whatever you are doing, keep it up!” At the end of two weeks we received two offers on our house, and we have now sold our house.

The challenging piece of this good news is that we must vacate our home by the end of March. I don’t know if you have received the memo yet or not, but we have sent all of you a memo inviting ourselves into your homes. We believe we have enough folks in the presbytery among whom we can circulate for a period of two months without driving anyone absolutely crazy! Positively, Sheryl and I have reduced our household belongings immensely—more than once—over the past eight years. Amazingly, there is a rich freedom in that sorting through and letting go.

So, I am soon to leave; you will continue your journey into that promised land, that land of hope. What I want to hold before you this day is a reminder of your true identity: You are a people chosen because God loves you. You are a people loved and claimed by God in covenant with God. You are in covenant with a God who will not let you go. Our God will lead you into whatever that new future may be.

Even today I have heard more than one utterance about “let’s just keep Ray as our ‘permanent’ General Presbyter.” No! This journey is not about Ray. As I leave you must know and be confident with regard to what your journey is about and who it is that has been underway with you in the work of this presbytery—for it is God. God has called us, and God leads us. I wish we could learn this even in our congregations. When a pastor leaves, the world will not come to an end. The new life in this presbytery will in no way come to an end, for you are underway with the transformation God has been calling you to be about. And God is faithful.

CONCLUSION. I wonder what would happen if we could kneel at the edge of our own graves? What if we were able this day as people of faith—and in our own congregations—to experience death first hand, and, as a result, to gain a new perspective about what is really important to us? Such an experience is at the heart of our faith. In Romans chapter 6 Paul uses the image of baptism and says our faith is literally a death, burial, and resurrection to new life. But “when life is pretty good and church is pleasant enough, who needs resurrection?” asks Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, p. 162). She goes on to say:

“... The way many of us are doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it. We proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we continue living with hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture. We follow a Lord who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own. We speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything within our power to maintain our equilibrium. If redeeming things continue to happen to us in spite of these deep contradictions in our life together, then I think that is because God is faithful even when we are not” (p. 220).

Indeed. The thing I pray for you this day as people of faith in this presbytery is that you and each of our congregations might kneel at the edge of our own graves. I pray we all could be confronted by our own—personal as well as corporate—deaths in the words, “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.”

Not long ago Sheryl and I went to see a George Clooney movie entitled, “Up in the Air.” We thought it would be comedic, it was not. It is about the sadness of our economy and the pain of those who are “let go,” “out-sourced,” “down-sized.” George Clooney plays a highly paid, highly valued executive in a Nebraska firm who contracts with other business firms around the country to come in and fire their employees. At one point in the movie Clooney is leading a day-long seminar for a large group of executives on what really matters in life. He places a gym bag/backpack on a table in front of the group and says, “This is all you can take with you on the next phase of your journey; everything you travel with must fit into this bag.” He then invites them to mentally place in the bag the things they value most.

I would like to invite you into this exercise with me, please. Think, if you will, of your own congregation. Think first, about the people you love, the people who mean the most to you, the people who have supported you and shaped you into who you are today. Put those people, if you will, in the bag. Have you identified them? Have you placed them in your bag? Now, think about all the memories and experiences that have been most meaningful to you in your congregation. Bundle those up, please, and place them in your travel bag. Finally, take all the physical things in your congregation—the building, the pews, the physical things we sometimes believe hold us together—and place those in your

travel bag. Will it all fit? That's our challenge today. I believe we people of faith in this time and place must learn to travel far more lightly on our journey into that new land. The good news of our election as God's people is this:

- It will make our lives harder, not easier.
- It will not give us everything we want;
 - it will demand everything we have.
- It will not put us on the side of the powerful and righteous of the world,
 - but on the side of the powerless and undeserving sinners.
- The privilege it brings is not that of enjoying material and spiritual blessings denied others;
 - it is the privilege of living in self-giving love for them.

(Adapted from Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine*, p. 140).

We must come outside of our buildings that have protected us too long. We must engage the world in a new day and a new place. We must let go of many things that we hold onto far too tightly. A poet says:

“I know
it's hard to be reconciled
not everything is exactly
the way it ought to be

but please turn around
and step into the future
leave memories behind
enter the land of hope.”

(Zbigniew Herbert, from *A Life, The Oprah Magazine*, September 2008, p. 63).

God is faithful. God will not leave us alone. God claims us, calls us, and sends us into the world to be God's people for today and the generation of today. That's our identity. The Book of Deuteronomy does not ask us to do that, or work for that reality. Deuteronomy proclaims God's love gives us that identity—now. All we need do is live day by day more fully embracing who we really are. That's your identity; that's your future. May it be so in the days and months ahead. Amen.