

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Epiphany 6A, February 16, 2020 (Matthew White)

On this Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, our Old Testament lesson is taken from the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is a fascinating and in many ways a challenging scriptural text. Most of it consists of a series of sermons delivered by Moses on the plains of Moab. After 40 years, the people of Israel have journeyed up from Egypt, wandering around in the “wilderness” of the Sinai Peninsula literally for decades, and finally they have come up along the eastern bank of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. Here they are almost to their promised land, just to the west across the Jordan River, while the endless sands of the Arabian desert stretch out to the east. It is the eve of the final deliverance of Yahweh's people into the land they have been promised.

Now our reading picks up in chapter 30, and Moses has been sermonizing pretty much non-stop since chapter 1. Aren't you glad this morning that I didn't go to the Moses school of preaching? Among other things, Moses has been repeating many of the ritual codes and moral commandments given by God to the people at Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb, and that is the reason for the Greek name of the book – deuterio for second, nomos for law – a second telling of the law.

So Deuteronomy is a long book and in some ways not always the most interesting. In all seriousness, though, this particular passage really marks a very poignant moment in the story of the people of Israel. Because after this long journey, all the way from Egypt, a journey of 40 years – meaning a whole generation of Israelites had known nothing but wandering – they are on the cusp. They are at the door of their final deliverance. And yet Moses knows that he personally will not be going with them into their new home. He makes this clear to the people. In the last few chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses hands over his authority and leadership to Joshua and then dies, right in the land of Moab, at the gateway, as it were to the promised land.

So the words Moses shares here are in many ways his final address, his valedictory address, we might say, to the people – the people he helped lead out of slavery, the people he suffered and struggled with, the people with whom he received God's holy teaching or Torah.

As I wrote this sermon, I pondered in my heart what it would have been like to be in Moses' place. What would you want to say to the people you had led for so long and now were about to leave?

I don't know what I would say. But Deuteronomy tells us what Moses says.

Moses tells the people that as they enter the Promised Land, they have a choice. They can choose to follow their God, Yahweh, and follow God's commandments, or they can choose to follow other gods. Moses predicts that if they follow Yahweh, the God of Israel, they will find blessings and a path to a beautiful future. But if they choose to follow other gods, if they are "led astray," in Moses' words, they will find their future blighted by that decision, by the choices that they make.

So here we are, thousands of years after Moses stood on the plains of Moab with his people. Do his words have anything to say to us today?

I think we do have an important choice to make, much like the choice that was facing the people of Israel in Moses' day, so very long ago.

Moses told his people that they had a choice between their God and other gods.

What choices do we have?

I don't think we feel like there is much of a choice between God and idols. I haven't seen many people lately worshipping Baal or Astarte.

But are there things that hold us back from God? Are there things we choose instead of God?

In fact, we can probably imagine quite a number of things that can hold us back from a strong relationship with God – the lure of materialism and consumerism, the culture of violence, simply the stress of daily living. All these things can come between us and the God who loves us so much.

But what I want to focus on today is fear. Because I think our fears very often can hold us back from a close and loving relationship with God.

There are a number of ways we may choose to view God through a lens of fear rather than through a lens of love.

The first often involves images of God that we have inherited from the past. Some of us, perhaps many of us, grew up in churches where the version of God we were taught to believe in as kids involved a powerful but distant patriarchal figure, perhaps like the bearded picture of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

All too often, we are exposed to visions of God as a harsh judge. Working as a hospital chaplain, I have met many people who look at life as a kind of dangerous negotiation with an arbitrary, capricious heavenly deity, who might send blessings but also might send punishment at any moment. Things like cancer or sudden heart attacks are interpreted as God testing us. The assumption is that if we just somehow believe hard enough or believe the right way, we'll be sheltered from suffering.

This is certainly one way of making sense of the world around us, although it leaves an awful lot of unexplained mysteries. But more importantly, it is not the image of God as a loving parent that Jesus continues to paint for us from across the millennia.

To the extent we look at God as a judge instead of a parent, we are also likely to feel many fears about our own failings. We fall and we fail because we are human. We fall and get up again, knowing we're likely to fall again a little further ahead on the journey. It is just part of our mortal experience.

But if God is an angry judge, what happens if we fall too far or fail too badly? Could we lose God's love? I don't know if this is a fear that any of you have ever had, but it has been very real for me at some of the lowest points in my life.

I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon that Moses in Deuteronomy 30 is preaching to the people of Israel while being aware that he is not going to be heading into the Promised Land with them. But do you remember the reason why this is the case?

Well, in short, the reason was that Moses too had a moment in his life where he gave in to fear rather than putting his trust in God.

The story goes back to a different part of Moses' life, recounted in Chapter 20 of the Book of Numbers.

You may remember that Moses leads the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but pretty soon they begin complaining about everything – the food, the dangers of the journey, Moses' leadership. Some people even begin saying it would have been better to stay in Egypt than take part in the great Exodus. It seems in particular that there are some sort of rabble-rousers, perhaps competitors for the leadership of the Israelites, who incited distrust among the people for Moses and for his brother Aaron.

In Numbers 20, the people of Israel reach an area described as the Desert of Zin – which coincidentally, I think is just a great name. It sounds like something from Lord of the Rings or Star Wars – the Desert of Zin. At any rate, as often seems to be the case with deserts, there isn't a whole lot of water around. The people began complaining about how Moses had brought to such a "wretched place."

God tells Moses to take his staff and go out to a rock with Aaron and order the rock to produce water. Moses is just supposed to hold his staff up and command water to appear from the rock.

But you know what happens? Moses gives in to fear.

Moses isn't sure that what God is telling him to do is really good enough. Moses remembers that back in the Book of Exodus, on another occasion he was called on to produce water from a rock and that time he had to hit the rock with his staff to get the water to come out.

Now God has just told him to hold the staff up and tell the water to come out. But Moses decides to give in to fear rather than trusting in God's word or trusting that God has the best in mind for the people.

And so Moses hits the rock with his staff. And water does emerge, but God is disappointed. God is disappointed because Moses chose fear over trust.

And it is for this reason that God decides that while Moses will lead the people to the Promised Land, he won't enter into it with them.

It may seem like a very harsh consequence for Moses. But where it speaks to us, I think, across the thousands of years that separate us from Moses' time, is that our fears *do* have consequences, just as Moses' fears had consequences for him.

Fear can have a great impact on our lives and certainly can hold us back from a relationship of trust and love with God, from that belief that God truly wants the best for us, that God is bigger than all of our fears. Fear can never lock God in a box unless we choose fear over God's love. God is always more powerful than anything that might make us afraid. God's love is more powerful than fear and God's love is more powerful than guilt and God's love is more powerful than shame. God's love is from everlasting to everlasting.

And so when we look at the choices we have to make, choices between fear and trust, we remember that like Moses told the people of Israel, we have different paths standing open to us – as if we had a road of fear at our left hand and a road of trust on our right hand.

What path do we want to follow? Fear will always make us small. Fear will always hold us back. Fear makes us hold our head down. Fear will always limit our lives.

But when we know and trust that our God is a God of love, that God's love is powerful, more powerful than any force in the universe, and that nothing can put us outside the kingdom of God's love, then we too can continue our journey to the Promised Land of our best lives and best selves.

All Moses had to do was speak the words over the rock, and he couldn't believe it was really that simple – but it was!

Can our faith really be as simple as knowing that our God loves us passionately and fully and completely?

What fears are holding us back? What path will we choose?