



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Closer Walk with God” **Sermon on Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

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This morning, we read from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means “second law” or “repeated law,” which it is. It is very much repeated in our scriptures this morning. While Guy read from the Gospel of Luke, he also read from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the response from Jesus every time he was questioned by the devil:

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" (*Deuteronomy 8:3*)

"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (*Deuteronomy 6:13*)

"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (*Deuteronomy 6:16*)

Repeated law.

People often ask, “Where is God in the difficult times?” Jesus in the wilderness says, “Read your Bible.” Know the Word. Keep it close to you. So that when the world goes crazy, you won’t join the raging mobs. Instead, you’ll have a north star, a light by which to walk.

The repeated law - it comes from Deuteronomy. Moses is the speaker. He is saying “Goodbye.” He will die in the wilderness, but gives direction for a walk with God in the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went

down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Moses isn't going to make it to the Promised Land, but he's hoping his words will make it. He's retiring. But he's not retiring.

When you're in charge, it's hard to let go. Ask any parent. I notice that even though my children are adults, I'm still in charge of their lives, always telling them what they need to do. I offer this advice freely.

I suspect that when I die and go to heaven, my mom will tell me to get "more rest and sit up straight." You don't retire when you love. You still worry, which is love. You still want the best, which is love. You want your children to be the best, which is love.

It's the same for Moses. He's taken his children out of Egypt, and through the wilderness, but are they ready to grow up and be in the Promised Land? I don't know this, but I suspect that Moses has a fear that his children will once again lose their religion. He knows! One minute his children are celebrating coming through the Red Sea, praising God, and the next they're complaining, losing their religion. One moment they're all in with God, the next moment they're building a golden calf. Minute by minute, moment by moment, losing their religion, just like that.

How long does it take you to lose your religion? Here we are in church now, looking religious. How far can you get out into this world before you start losing your religion? Why don't we find out? When I say the Benediction, look at your watch and write down the time. And then the minute you lose your religion, write down that number and email me.

Suppose at the moment you look at your watch, you say to yourself, "The service has run long again. The preacher needs to preach shorter sermons." Well, then, you've gone four seconds. You've already sinned. Don't question it! I've been thoroughly educated in these things. I know. So, send me an email with the words "four seconds."

Now, some of you aren't that way at all. Some of you can't get enough church. It's like you have nothing better to do. You already know that you will go a long, long, time, an amazingly long time without losing your religion. But we know that you also suffer from a lack of self-awareness. So while it feels like you're not sinning, we'll meet as a committee, and adjust your time.

Some of you won't need to keep track of the time at all. Your spouse will tell you. Sometime after the benediction a voice will say something like, "7 minutes, 23 seconds."

They've marked the time when you've lost your religion. And don't worry, you won't even have to worry about sending it in. Your spouse, or in some cases, your friend, not that your spouse can't be your friend, anyway - I'm just trying to say we'll get the results. Let's find out how well we do. Next week we'll put the numbers in the bulletin, and you can compare and contrast your where you were with the rest of the congregation. What do you think about that? I know you'll like that. I know the choir isn't going to last very long at all.

I think Moses is worried about how quickly we can lose our religion. It's easy to do.

We've all read the news articles about Covid and the church. It's hit congregations very hard. The consensus is that one-quarter to one-third of the people who used to attend worship aren't coming back. "I've just gotten out of the habit of going to worship." The habit. I'm sure God enjoys being on the same level as a habit. But it's been difficult. Masks on and off again, cases going up and down. Now, they're back down. We'd like to get back up, but the pandemic has caused a worker shortage in the church. When can we have communion in the pews? Well, we need to gather the workers. We need ushers and greeters, and elders. And we hear, "I could have told you this when you closed down the church?" Yes. I know.

For the most part, you all have been pretty good and patient and supportive. So many pastors have called it quits, opting to sell real estate instead. They're hoping for a Promised Land that they can live on. Isn't it interesting how it is that when the times get tough, we can so easily lose our religion? At exactly the precise moment when we're supposed to keep our religion.

When we're backed against the wall, that's the time when we need to step up our faith. "Yes, I believe." But instead we say, "No, I don't even know him. I've never met the man. I don't know whom it is you're talking about." When the road is difficult, we're the ones who are supposed to step up, bandage the wounds, help the hurting, and sacrifice for their comfort and care.

To be a disciple takes some discipline. Discipline is so very needed. I have been slow to come to that understanding. The discipline of Christianity. I've relied so much on God's grace and love. But often that looks like nothing in a hurting world.

As you know, Beth and I have a new puppy. And a puppy takes some discipline. To a puppy, everything is a new creation! It's exciting and fun! And Beth and I have to be the bearers of bad news and tell the puppy, "Bella that's just not so." "You can't just do that everywhere! You can't sit on top of my head when I'm on the sofa. You can't bite my wife." Discipline. The way we've been told to discipline our dog is to reinforce good behavior and not reward the bad behavior. The way you reinforce good behavior is to provide a treat for everything that is in the realm of good. "Heel, Bella!" Treat. "Sit." Treat. "Fetch." Treat. Anything and everything - treat. Our puppy weighs 500 pounds and still sits on my head. But we're making progress. Discipline.

How do you remember to keep the faith? Moses does it in a way that reminds me of a book I read a number of years ago now. "Moonwalking with Einstein". It's a book about the discipline of remembering. What inspired the author to write the book was that he was reporting on a memory competition that was being held. I don't know if you've heard about these things. But people gather around in a hotel and compete in memorization competitions. Memorizing the order of cards in decks. Memorizing long lists. Memorizing poetry. The reporter thought

these people must have amazing brains, but when he interviewed the people who were doing this, they said, "You can do this. Anybody can do this if they put their mind to it. Get the discipline down." And so he did just that and even won a competition.

One of the tricks that I can remember is that in order to remember something like a grocery list of 100 items, you should think about a building you know. Let's say your home. Then you take your grocery list and commit it to memory. So here you go. The first thing on your list is to open your mailbox, and there in the mailbox is a hot loaf of bread. As you walk up the sidewalk, there's salmon everywhere on the sidewalk. On the first steps up to the house, there are olives. In front of the door is a bottle of grape juice. You get picture. And because you can see it, you remember it.

Moses is doing a little of that. When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall take some of the fruit off the ground.

Next you place the fruit into a basket. The basket then goes to the church, and at the church, the priest takes the basket. And all the time you are telling the story of the faith, and you say, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, then you tell the story of God, which is your story. That your ancestor was a wandering Arabian. Homeless, an alien. But God made a great nation.

You tell the story of being treated harshly by the Egyptians, but God brought us out on eagle's wings to this land. So you see it - the first fruit, the journey to the church, the priest, the altar - and everything see is your faith. It's the discipline in keeping our religion. Can I ask that we might do that, too? So that we can hold on to our religion, not just the numbers for next week's bulletin, but so that the light might shine.

So that maybe we get home and check the mailbox, there might be what inside? Bread! And you remember the bread. There with Elijah in the wilderness. I remember the bread with Jesus. This is my body broken for you.

Sidewalk. Salmon. I will make you fishers of people. How do we fish with love? And you think, "How might I share the good news with these people? And as you go up the steps - olives. You think of the Mount of Olives, how Jesus said, Lord, take this cup from me, not my will, but thy will." Not what I want, but what you want. There at the door, grape juice. This is cup of the new covenant sealed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. Remember. I'm the vine and you are the branches.

And you can do that wherever you go. Place the symbols of the church at work, at church, at your home, you can do it. On the way to work. You can do this. And you'll start to have this discipline, God will start to speak to you on this journey we call Lent. A closer walk with God.