

Living in The Promised Land

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
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For years, it hung on a wall in the courthouse lobby of Pulaski County, KY. It was not a picture of the county namesake, Count Casimir Pulaski. What hung on the wall was an empty picture frame, and it looked ridiculous.

But this picture of nothing was not nailed to the wall as a joke. It was put there as a testimony to something that had been taken away – the Ten Commandments.

The frame used to contain the Ten Commandments, but in 2001 a U.S. district judge ordered that the display be removed. While the Commandments came down, the frame remained as a reminder of God's place in our lives – all aspects of our lives, both public and private.

In today's Old Testament lesson, Moses says to our spiritual ancestor, the Israelites, – and us – “you must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.”

Here, Moses is talking about the Ten Commandments, which he mentions just four verses later, and which Jesus sums up in Matthew and Luke, saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...” and, “... love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments,” says Jesus, “hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love of God and love of neighbor – that's Christianity in a nutshell. Without having love of God and love of neighbor at the core of who you are, both Moses and Jesus tell us we're lost.

Moses puts it this way saying, “Give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”

Through so much of life these days, we are like the Israelites wondering the dessert, trying to reach the Promised Land, the promised land of peace and security for our families and loved ones, abundance for all people so that no one

goes without, the wisdom and knowledge to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and the assurance of God's grace and mercy for all people the world over.

We go through our lives longing to reach the Promised Land, but something blocks us at nearly every turn. For Moses, it was a lack of faith. Yes, believe it or not, Moses – like us – had moments of human weakness, moments when his faith was lacking.

For instance, today's scripture passage finds Moses standing at edge of the Promised Land, asking God to let him cross into this land of milk and honey. But God says to Moses – in the Book of Numbers, chapter 20 (v. 12) – “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

God is referring to when Moses struck the rock with his staff in the wilderness to bring forth water for the Israelites. God had not told Moses to strike the rock, not that time. Rather, he told him to speak to the rock, not to strike it. That's also in Numbers, chapter 20 (v. 8; NIV). Not only did Moses fail to follow God's instructions, but he made it about himself, not God.

He took the focus off God by using his own force, his earthly rock-striking power, Then he spoke harshly to God's people and took credit for God's work, saying to the Israelites, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” – “... must we bring ... water” from the rock, as if he and God were on the same level.

God clearly says to Moses in Numbers, chapter 20 (v. 8; NIV), “Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water.” God wanted to speak gentle words of blessing in the midst of the Israelites' great thirst, and instead Moses used force to do God's will and anger to make God's point.

It's an interesting lesson for us all. God wants to show his faithfulness to his people, through us. God wants our words and actions to reflect his care and provision, through our knowledge and love of God and our love of neighbor – the two Great Commandments.

You know the real reason we can't have the Ten Commandments in a courthouse, don't you? In a building full of lawyers, judges and politicians, you just can't post things like “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” lie, “or Commit Adultery”. No, I'm kidding

But what is true is that God wants our words and actions to reflect our knowledge and love of God and our love of neighbor – the two Great Commandments. Having learned this lesson the hard way, Moses says to the Israelites – and us – “... Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.” Moses is warning us to avoid his fate, missing out on the Promised Land.

Now for Moses, the Promised Land was the actual land of Canaan, and he died before the Israelites entered and lived in that land. For us, the Promised Land is our faith in Jesus Christ. God longs for us to live our lives in faith, and he wants us to help others to do the same, teaching by our words and deeds and sharing in the blessings of God.

We are called to live out our faith in such a way that, as Moses says, all people will look at us and say, “Surely this is a wise and discerning people!” In other words, people should look at you and me and us as a church and say, “Wow! They really do reflect God’s love and grace and mercy, they really do try to live by the teachings of Jesus, they really do seek the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

Do you think people say that about us as a church, about you as an individual, about your family and group of friends. Sometimes, yes, of course they do. That’s because we really do try to live by our faith and reflect it in all we do, even as imperfect as we are.

Now, the reason we don’t suffer the fate of Moses when we fail to embody and reflect the faith is because we have something that Moses did not. We have Jesus. Moses had the old covenant through Abraham; we have the New Covenant through Christ.

Rather than being an empty picture frame that points to where God once was, we are to be a true reflection of Jesus, pointing to where God is, where God is in our lives as individuals and where God is and seeks to be in the lives of all people.

That’s our ticket into the promised land, that’s our future - the fullness of Christ in this age – a fullness in our hearts that not even death can take from us – and the fullness of Christ in the age to come, when Jesus returns to reconcile all creation to our Heavenly Father, ushering in a new heaven and a new earth.

For us to live to see that day as a people of faith, we must heed the warning of Moses and never let our knowledge and love of God slip from our minds, and we must strive to make Jesus known to our children and our children's children.

If we commit and recommit to that this day, to being a better reflection of Christ – as individuals, as families and as a church – if we commit to that then we and our children and our children's children will indeed live out our lives in the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land of God's care and provision for us and for all people. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Let us pray:

God our teacher, who helps us to understand the world around us, thank you for the privilege of education. In a year of turmoil, disruption, and loss, we recognize the gift of learning and the gift of teaching in ways we may not have appreciated before.

You have blessed our communities with teachers who take new skills and concepts and pass them along to each new class of young people.

God, you came as a child to show us how to be fully human, to show us how to be children of God. You have given our children minds that grow and develop in unique ways, at unique speeds, and we are astounded by that miracle. You speak to us through the words, actions, play, and feelings of children.

You call us to listen to the Spirit speaking through our young siblings in Christ. We celebrate the beginning of this school year and ask for your blessings upon the children, the educators, and the families who support them.

But in this celebration of education and learning, we do not forget there are children and families and teachers who do not have the resources they need.

Today, we remember those who are beginning school this year: those who have what they need to learn and grow in safety, and those who lack supplies, teachers, safe buildings, and accommodations for all needs and abilities.

We come to worship together, to lift up our young people and all those who care for them and teach them. We come, too, in prayer at this time for those who are struggling with illness and disease, physical limitations, grief and sorrow. We pray all this in the name of our Great Teacher, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.