

GOD'S STORY OUR STORY

Keeping the Story in Our Hearts

Deuteronomy 5:1-21, 6:4-9

PENTECOST 17

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This morning, we heard from an Old Testament book most people never read — Deuteronomy. The Book of Deuteronomy, which translates as “*second law*,” is the Fifth Book of the Torah, where it is called **Devarim**. Chapters One through Thirty of the Book contain three sermons, or speeches, delivered to the Israelites by Moses on the plains of Moab shortly before they enter the Promised Land. The first sermon recounts the forty years of wilderness wanderings, which led to that moment, and ends with an exhortation to observe the law or teachings, later referred to as the Law of Moses.

The second speech reminds the Israelites of the need to follow the laws that God (or Yahweh) has given to them, on which the possession of the land depends. And the third offers the comfort that, even if Israel would prove to be unfaithful and, so, lose the land, with repentance, all could be restored. The final four chapters (31-34) of Deuteronomy consist of the Song of Moses, the Blessing of Moses, and narratives recounting the passing of the mantle of leadership from Moses to Joshua, finally ending with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo.

Before engaging today's assigned Narrative Lectionary's reading, let me tell you the back story of the discovery of the Deuteronomy Scroll in a pile of rubble in the Jerusalem temple built by Solomon. It is not known how long the Scroll had been there. Three hundred years is an educated guess. The story is recorded in the historical writings of the Hebrew scriptures, II Kings 22-23, and II Chronicles 34-35.

Here's the story. Josiah became king when he was eight years old. He became king at such a young age through an act of violence. His father, Amon, was murdered by a cabal of conspirators in a bloody palace coup. Josiah was rescued and promptly crowned king, the youngest king ever to sit on Judah's throne. The year was about 640 B.C. Josiah's reign would end thirty-one years later, when he would be killed by Egyptians in the Battle of Megiddo in 609 B.C. Violence launched his reign and violence ended it. But the thirty-one years of his reign was simply stunning, in no small part, because of the discovery of the Deuteronomy Scroll.

The boy-king, Josiah, inherited a huge moral and political mess. His grandfather, King Manasseh, may have been the worst king the Southern Kingdom of Judah had ever experienced, filling the country with every imaginable evil, and some unimaginable ones, during his fifty-five year reign. Assyria was the dominant world power at the time. It had a strangle-hold on the Near East for three hundred years, and had acquired the distinction of making a high art out of evil — cruelty, torture, black magic, child sacrifice — you name it.

King Manasseh was a great admirer of all things Assyrian, and imported its evil by the cartload into Judah and Jerusalem. He constructed Assyria-inspired sex and religious shrines all over the country, erected obscene phallic pillars to the sex goddess, Asherah, adorned Solomon's Temple with foul images and relics, and even built rooms for prostitution. Amon, Josiah's father, continued Manasseh's course, but he was assassinated two years later. Such were the conditions faced by the eight-year-old Josiah when he was placed on Judah's throne. By the time he was twenty, Josiah was acting as king on his own, and began cleaning up the Manasseh mess, scrubbing the country clean of the sex and religion idolatries.

When King Josiah was twenty-six, Hilkiah, the High Priest, found a scroll, the *“book of the law of the LORD given through Moses”* (II Chronicles 34:14), while extensive repairs were being carried out in Solomon's Temple. The book, of course, was Deuteronomy. It had long been buried in rubble during Manasseh's misrule. When it was read to Josiah, he immediately embraced it as his text for

completing the reform he had begun six years earlier. It was the defining moment of his kingship. He had his text to go along with his mission of restoring his country as a community of the people of God.

In his book, **SACRED THIRST**, Craig Barnes, who is now the President of Princeton Seminary, tells the story about how, when he was a child, his father brought home a twelve-year-old boy named Roger. Roger's parents had both died of a drug overdose. Craig's father was the family's pastor, and when it became clear that there was no one else to care for the boy, Craig's parents decided to take him in and raise him as one of their own sons. From the day he walked in the door, Roger was part of the Barnes family.

It was a beautiful act of grace on the part of Craig's parents to adopt Roger, but it also created a lot of challenges for them. You can imagine that growing up in the home of heroin addicts was far different from what Roger discovered in this new stable and healthy home. With his birth parents constantly stoned, Roger had spent the first twelve years of his life consumed by fear. He became completely self-absorbed as a way of survival. Often he wondered if there would be enough food for him to eat, and he learned to fend for himself.

But now, in his new home, Roger had to learn about sharing, using good manners, and doing family chores. Over and over, Roger's adoptive parents would have to say to him, "No, Roger, that's not how we do it in this family." Now Roger had been embraced as a full-fledged member of the Barnes family. He had been given a new story as one of their beloved sons. But it was going to take some time and effort for him to learn how to live in this new story and to leave his old story behind. It was going to take some time and effort for him to learn how to act like a member of the Barnes family. And it was only because Roger was loved unconditionally by his new family that he would be able to make the necessary changes.

The same thing was true for the Israelites, as they made their journey out of slavery in Egypt and into a new life of freedom. Through the leadership of Moses,

God had rescued them and given them a new story. They were no longer slaves. They were God's covenant people, God's ***“treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”*** They had been adopted into God's family, just like Roger had been adopted into a new family. But, also like Roger, the Israelites would need to learn how to live in this new story, how to live like members of this new family. And this is why God gave them the Ten Commandments, so that they could learn to live like the beloved children of God that they already were.

There are two places in the Old Testament where the Ten Commandments can be located: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. This signals just how important they are to God's story and our story. Too often, we misunderstand what is happening here with the giving of the law. We also misunderstand how God works in the Old Testament. We see the Ten Commandments as a list of rules that God's people needed to follow in order to be saved. However, it is crucial for us to notice that before God issues any commandment, there is this declaration: ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”*** (Deut. 5:6).

This declaration of who God is and what God has done turns the notion that Israel is saved by their good works on its head. We must not forget the order of how the Exodus story unfolds. First, God rescues His people from slavery as an act of grace. Then, God leads them to Sinai and gives them the Law. Grace always comes first! The Israelites are called to keep the commandments, not in order to be saved, but because they have already been saved. Here's another way of putting it. Obedience to God is always a response of gratitude for God's grace! Not only does grace precede the giving of the Law, but the giving of the Law itself is an expression of grace. Think about it. True freedom does not come from abandoning all rules and living however you want. True freedom comes from becoming who we're intended to be, living fully into God's design.

Back to the story of Roger. It was a gift of grace for his adoptive parents to give him rules and to show him a new way of acting in the Barnes family. Is this not true for all parents? You demonstrate your love and care to your children by

showing them the way, being clear about expectations and teaching them to live in a way that will help them flourish. The point is, never the rules or boundaries themselves, but it is the way those rules and boundaries lead to healthy relationships that enables us to thrive according to God's design.

It was a terrible day when the telegram arrived at the Barnes' house, announcing that Roger had been killed while performing an act of heroism in Vietnam. Craig Barnes remembers his mother's tears most of all. She wept tears of profound grief, to be sure, but she also wept because she was so proud of him. He had given his life to save others. Barnes asks, **"How could he have learned how to do this but through the sacrificial love of my parents?"** Craig goes on to make this connection between Roger and us, as those who have been adopted as God's children through baptism into Christ. **"Where can we learn to give our lives to something other than the self-absorbed effort of trying to quench our own parched souls? Only in the home of the Heavenly Father, who sacrificed His own Son, because He loves us. All we do is receive. And that changes everything"** (pp 85-86).

Beloved people of God, it is only as we receive God's grace in Jesus that we can keep this story in our hearts.

AMEN