

Bound for the Promised Land

Deuteronomy 34 by Patty Friesen

On Wednesday when I arrived at the church office and Adeline asked if I had heard the news from Ottawa, I had flashbacks to 13 years ago sitting in the church office at Faith Mennonite in Minneapolis when a church member called to ask if I was listening to the news out of New York City and Washington. One's response is the initial shock and then oh dear, what's going to happen next and then eventually turning off the radio because it get to be too much. News events can dramatically change a country in a day. It's not business as usual in the world or at church. We have to prayerfully think through our responses and ask how God may speak to us through scripture this morning.

The only problem with that is I've been using a different lectionary from everyone else at church. I've had nightmares of forgetting my sermon or of preaching in my pajamas but I never imaged I'd be in a totally different lectionary year. It's kind of embarrassing. So I'm in Deuteronomy, while everyone else is in Leviticus, but I trust that Moses' death may reveal something to us about how to speak of death in our own country.

Moses' death marks the end of the first five books of Moses, of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and marks a dramatic turning point for Israel. Everything they have known is now different, everything they have gone through from escape in Egypt to wilderness wandering, has been under the leadership of Moses who led them and interceded for them and showed them the holiness of God. Now he is not going into the Promised Land with them and the question is what happens next.

These last chapters of Deuteronomy are like a play by play of the last days of Moses' life. He preaches for at least 4 chapters and then sings a long song in chapter 32 and has a long blessing in chapter 33. It's like he is putting off climbing Mt. Nebo as children find many excuses not to go to bed. Finally Moses climbs the mountain and God shows him the length and breadth of this beautiful land, saying , This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, I will give it to your descendants. I will let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there. So Moses, the servant of the Lord died there and the Israelites wept for Moses.

The death of Israel's first great leader marks a turning point. The implicit reason for his death outside the Promised Land is not punishment but that

Moses' work is now finished. The people have the words of God that Moses wrote down for them in Torah and they no longer need Moses. Joshua is commissioned with the laying on of hands but it is clear that it is God who will lead the people into the Promised Land. God's word and Moses' mission are complete before they even get the land and is not dependent on getting the land. Torah does not guarantee land and security and blessing. It offers it and describes the way to it, revealing instruction on how they are to live but it is left open as an ongoing story throughout the rest of Scripture.

In the same way, we as Canadians are not guaranteed land and security and blessing. We certainly have enjoyed these gifts and Grandma Friesen gave thanks every day for the safety and religious freedom of living in Canada, a promised land, after coming out of Russia in 1924. But even Russia itself under Catherine the Great in the 1700's was a promised land of farms, religious freedom and military exemption for Mennonites. There are no guarantees that promised lands really belong to us in the first place nor do they remain as refuges of safety and security. God's people are subject to the same violent forces at work in the world as everyone else. Jesus' promises do not even involve land and definitely not security as he calls us to lay down our lives for him and for each other.

Last week, after the golden calf episode, God told Moses she wouldn't go into the Promised Land with the children of Israel. Moses negotiated with God and God agreed to go. Now it is Moses himself who isn't going into the Promised Land. God has told him to climb Mt. Nebo and look at the Promised Land but he will not go there and will die on Mt. Nebo just because of a little incident back at Meribah. In Numbers 20, Moses was commanded to speak to the rock and it would yield its water for the people and their cattle to drink. God has referred to himself as their Rock so symbolically, Moses is to intercede to this Rock as if speaking to God for this life-giving water that the people and animals need. Moses instead says, Hear now you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And he lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice." Despite the offense of hitting the rock and claiming that Moses and Aaron worked this bit of magic, water came forth abundantly and the congregation drank, and their cattle. God gave water but reminds Moses, though he is a servant of the Lord, someone whom the Lord knew face to face, he could not that relationship or God's holiness for granted.

There is a connection about striking the rock and rejecting God the Rock. Moses expands on this in chapter 32 where he describes God turning his face from those who scoffed at the Rock of their salvation, the Rock that gave them

birth. While Israel is destined for destruction, in time God turns face back towards them. This turning about face in Latin is called conversion. God is capable of conversion, turning about face, turning from destruction to mercy. This is an important lesson about God: if God is capable of conversion, then so are we.

Kathleen Norris was a typical young adult, someone who had been raised in the Christian tradition and then abandoned it in college. Her autobiography, *Amazing Grace*, is about conversion, of turning back to her roots in Christianity and reclaiming her heritage in a new and meaningful way. She said what had become meaningless Christian language, idle words to her before, have now become words of life. She says her faith is a daily and life-long process of turning to Christ and working it out with fear and trembling. When she was giving a lecture about her conversion, a young woman asked, "I don't mean to be offensive, but I just don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm."

Norris reflected, "I had spent too many years outside the Christian faith to be offended by her comment. I know very well that faith can seem strange and even impenetrable, to those who do not share it so I replied, 'Look, as far as I am

concerned this religion has saved my life and my marriage. It's not comfort I'm talking about but salvation."

There are not idle words but rather your very life, Moses exhorts the people and they ring true for us today, saving us and sustaining us. They are also words of life for our children, that by learning them, they always have something to come back to. God is always turning about face towards us and the opportunity always lies for us to turn toward God.

Maybe this is the wake-up call that everyone is talking about this week. Not a wake-up call to revenge but a wake-up call to the grief at violent death experienced by so many people in our own country and around the world. Maybe it is a wake-up call not to take life and security for granted but to trust in God's providence every day. Maybe it is a wake-up call to conversion, a deeper searching and walking with God in new ways as individuals, a church and a country. Let's pray...