

“A Last Sunday Sermon”  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
February 13, 2011

There is an old joke among preachers that when you have something really controversial to preach, or if you just want to tell off the chair of the deacons, save it for your “Last Sunday Sermon.” The idea, of course, is that on the last Sunday in front of a congregation, you have the absolute freedom to make every point you left out over the years – and if those points take, well done, my good and faithful servant! And, if not, you’d better run, my good and faithful servant! Well, today, we get to listen to a sound byte from the Last Sunday Sermon for Moses.

I have to tell you, the Israelites dodged a bullet. There they are – having wandered around pretty faithlessly for 40 years – that is 14,600 days or 350,400 hours. That is how much time Moses had given to them – that’s a long time. There they are – poised in the hills of Moab – they can see the wheat growing in the sunshine on this side and the goats grazing in the shadows on that side. The Promised Land is almost in their grasp.

That is because their leader, Moses, has served God well. Moses has served God’s people well, and his grand finale hardly seems fair. Moses, for all his patience and all his wisdom in dealing with this cantankerous group of slackers, cannot go with them into the long awaited Promised Land. Why? Because in one of their many stiff-necked moments recorded in Numbers 20, God’s people were thirsty and they complained, “Oh, would that we had died when our kindred died. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place?” The drama of it all! Like this was really Moses’ idea of a good time for forty years. But, God heard their cries and told Moses to command a rock to bring forth water for their thirst. Moses did, but he was so irritated by this time that he hit that rock in frustration. And, God didn’t much like that, for whatever reason, and God sent Moses right up to the Promised Land, but the sign hanging on the door said, “Everyone welcome-except Moses.” So, Moses gears up to deliver his Last Sunday Sermon – the final farewell.

Have you ever had to say good-bye? Good-byes are hard – they set off something right in the pit of our hearts that has inspired all kinds of poetry and music. Sarah McLachlan sings a tear jerker about good-byes. “I will remember you, Will you remember me? Don’t let your life pass you by. Weep not for the memories.” Don’t let your life pass you by. This is your chance. This is your chance to shine and shine brightly. It was an emotional message for Moses. Moses knew his death was imminent. Will you remember me? He knew that he would be buried in the very land on which he stood to deliver his final words, but weep not. Despite the fact that the Israelites drove Moses crazy – drove him to raise his hands to God in sheer frustration and ask, “What am I to do with these people?” they had a lot of memories. I mean, a LOT of memories.

They started out as broken, exiled people crying to God to do something, anything to give them some relief. They were demoralized – having been in slavery for 400 years. They were landless – no place of their own to call home – no yard to mow; no house to clean. They were beaten down and confused about how this God worked. Moses was confused, too, when he was minding his own business far away from these people, and God showed up in a burning bush and said, “Psst! Hey, Moses! Come here! I need you to do something for me. Go help these people. They are in a bad way.” Moses was not thrilled with the idea, but he went. He used every leadership skill in the book to get those Israelites from point A to point B. Along the way, they made some choices that were real stinkers. They complained. They loved Moses one day and hated him the next. They complained. They believed in God when it was convenient and

built golden calves when it was not. They complained. They said one faithful thing and did two unfaithful things, and did I mention that they complained? And, now, after all the misery, all the sweat, all the pain, and all the labor of a trip that should have taken a week but ended up taking forty miserable years, Moses gets the last word.

You would expect Moses to let them have it, but the truth is that like a parent with a fiercely independent and rebellious child, Moses loves those stiff-necked people, so Moses uses this part of his Last Sunday Sermon to serve their best interests, to try one more time to get their attention. He wants them to 'get' that they are dealing with serious business – God is serious business. And, God has a serious future filled with serious hope in store for them. And, this serious God wants so very much to give them his heart. Once more, Moses calls them to make good choices. Seriously. Don't repeat the bad choices of the past. That will be a temptation.

That is always a temptation. It will always be a temptation for the recovering drug addict to use again. It will always be a temptation for the person trying to get organized to let things start piling up again. It will always be a temptation for the person trying to grow in self-confidence to let someone else make the tough decisions. It will always be a temptation for the person trying to grow in Spirit to fall back into a sour self-righteousness. If any of you have ever tried to kick a habit or change something about yourself, you know that new choices take a lot of effort. It is hard to let go of ways that have served us in the past even when we dig deep, and even when we know we need to change, and even when we know exactly what we need to do.

Moses was crystal clear. His logic was not hard to follow. Your relationship to God is the key to every other relationship you have. So, if you take care of that relationship, if you make the choice to love God, to walk in God's ways, to follow God's commandments, then this last Sunday sermon is a feel-good sermon for you. God is going to bless you. But, if you let your heart wander off on its own and you make the choice not to listen and to pull away, then this last Sunday sermon is a hellfire and damnation sermon for you. Doom and gloom for you if you let your heart chase after other gods.

And, before we think that does not apply to us, remember that we come from a long line of faith ancestors who were tempted by other gods like golden calves. When God turned out to be too hard to deal with, they switched over to a god they could make for themselves.

If you think you have no golden calves, let me suggest several golden calf detectors to wave over your life. Your checkbook, for instance. What do you invest in the most heavily? What do your check stubs teach you about what you worship? Or, your calendar. What gets your time – which, after all, is more precious than money. When it comes to rest, or prayer, or waiting on the Lord, what gets in the way? Whatever it is, it is a golden calf for sure. A job that promises security. A relationship that promises safety. A way of thinking that promises self-promotion. A position in the community that promises power. All little golden calves happy to graze in your life until they've eaten you alive. So, you'd better watch it, says Moses.

I wonder if Mighty Moses would have softened his message if he had known that in 2011, his words would be preached as part of a baby dedication service for the cutest little redhead. I don't know. But, I've read his story more than once, and I can tell you this as fact. Winnie the Pooh, Moses was not. This choice he offers in Deuteronomy is not stuffed with fluff, and it is not one that we particularly want to pass on to the little Roo's in our lives, because the choice sounds more like a threat. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, then you shall live...but if your heart turns away, down will come baby cradle and all. Most church people don't like these pronouncements. This is not the picture of God we want to give to Luke – buddy, you'd better shape up, or God is going to get you! As a pastor, I don't like it either. I

don't want to scare faith into people. I've heard too many reckless pronouncements from televangelists who have used this kind of theology from everything from hurricanes to AIDS – if this disaster happens to you, then it must mean that God is coming after you because of your sin. It seems safer to steer clear of such judgments altogether.

But, I wonder if perhaps my resistance, our resistance, to this kind of thinking is not simply a concern that we are turning God into a big bad wolf, but our wish to live as though God were not attentive to the choices we make. God IS attentive. I don't want Luke to think that his choices don't matter, or that God doesn't care about his decisions. I want Luke to know that God cares and cares deeply. I want Luke to know that he matters. I want him to know that his faith matters. I want him to know that whatever success comes his way and whatever failure comes his way, he always has a choice, and I want US to teach him to choose life. The best way we can do that is to choose life ourselves. This is not a mystical secret that requires a magic wand and a bubbling Harry Potter potion. Choosing life is finding our spiritual nerve. Choosing life is having the nerve to tear into each day with deep faith. Learn things you have told yourself you would never learn. Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often and laugh loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Surround yourself with what you love – whether it is family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence. Walk around the block. Turn off the television. Get together with your friends. Invite someone you do not know well to lunch or dinner. Clean out a drawer. Quit doing something that is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Give money to a cause you care about. Stop arguing. Just stop. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it. Walk away when the gossip starts. Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Worship with all your heart. Love your church. Help your church be brave. Pray saying 'hello' and 'thank you' to God. Pray asking God to change you in ways you have not imagined. Remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God's love with someone who has forgotten it. See that all of life is holy. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Live a life you can be proud of. Let God make your life deep. Find your nerve.

Today, I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.