

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
November 12, 2023  
Deuteronomy 8:7-18  
*Gratitude to God*

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch - the traditional Jewish grouping of the five books that form the Torah, or the law. Deuteronomy is a Greek word that means “the second law” or the “repetition of the law.” The Hebrew title for this book is *Devarim* which means “words,” which in some ways is a bit more fitting to me. Deuteronomy consists of a series of speeches given by Moses. The first speech details Israel’s history of wandering in the wilderness following the receipt of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai (or Mt. Horeb as it is known in Deuteronomy). This speech is given just before the Hebrew people are about to enter the Promised Land. The journey from slavery to freedom is about to be realized and it is helpful to know where you have been, before you take the next steps.

Today’s scripture is from Moses’ second speech, which is focused on the importance of worshiping the Lord God and following the laws - the teachings - that the Lord God has conveyed through Moses. Hear now these words from Deuteronomy chapter 8:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that the Lord has given you.

“Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep the commandments, the ordinances, and the statutes that I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them and when your herds and flocks have multiplied and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions.

The Lord God made water flow for you from flint rock. The Lord God fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is the Lord God who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm the covenant

that was sworn to your ancestors, as the Lord God is doing today. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Like some of you, I grew up in the era before there were iPhones and iPads and DVD players in the car. Long road trips were different then. My first memory of a car trip was when I was 5. We were moving from the suburbs of Washington D.C. to Omaha NE for 3 months for my dad's job. My mom was pregnant with my youngest brother and my middle brother and I rode in the back seat of the "blue car" as we called it. It was the summer and we could only have the windows cracked because we had our cat with us. No car conditioning. My crayons melted on the back window ledge. "Are we there yet?" I asked as we passed through Pennsylvania. "Are we there yet?" as Ohio seemed to never end. The "I" states loomed ahead ...Indiana, Illinois, Iowa. At some point my dad wised up and gave me a map. My dad was a geographer by vocation and maps were some of my favorite toys as a child. The "Are we there yet?" question was put back on me... are we?

My family loved road trips, so as I got older my math skills were sharpened by calculating how long until our next stop. In our family I was the keeper of the map. And that was a bit magical for me. I had the secret knowledge of where we were in the context of the overall trip. I knew how far we had come and how far we had left to go. I knew whether there were mountains or rivers or endless flat plains ahead or when the suburbs would be coming to signal a city. And I knew where we might stop for food. But without the map of what lay ahead, I know I would have been an annoying pest. Well - I probably still was an annoying pest, especially when we were so close. So close... that is where we find the Hebrew people this morning. So close to entering the Promised Land. A good land, "a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper." Moses tells the people they are about to enter abundance – abundance like they could never imagine. Abundant water, abundant food, abundant resources to fashion tools for protection.

For the Hebrew people fleeing oppression and slavery, the waters were the means of their freedom – the Lord parted the Red Sea allowing them to flee Egypt. But the waters – or the lack thereof – as they traversed the desert were also reminders of the fragility of their existence. As our scripture shares they traveled through an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. How easy it was for them to forget the source of their freedom and the source of their provisions. During their 40 years in the desert they go from singing and dancing, praising God for the abundant blessings of freedom, to griping and complaining about the miserable food and drink they have in the wilderness. I love these stories in Exodus and Numbers because they are so real to me and so real to my faith journey. I would love to say that on my journey toward the Promised Land I only focus on praising God for all God has given me. But sometimes, I am way more like the Hebrews, whining and complaining,

needing reassurance, forgetting God's mercy, love, and grace. I need to be led to the spring, led to the well, so I can draw life giving water. Moses ends the litany of promised abundance by telling the Israelites "You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that the Lord has given you." Yes – eat your fill – revel and celebrate the abundance, and then remember to whom you belong and bless the Lord God. Bless the Lord with your thanks and praise and as we hear in verse 11: "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep the commandments, the ordinances, and the statutes that I am commanding you today."

Moses has just shared these with the people. In Deuteronomy chapter 5 he relates the Ten Commandments and in chapter 6, the beautiful words known as the Shema "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." And in chapter 7, Moses reminds them they are a chosen people who should know that the Lord is the faithful God who maintains loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

These *devarim* – these words - tell the promise of the law that will shape the Hebrew people, giving them a common identity and way of life – loving God and loving neighbor. Throughout these words there is a constant theme of God's abiding presence – the importance of telling and retelling the story of the covenant and the exodus to freedom, because our memories are short, and we too easily forget the ways God has marked our lives. Part of the challenge for the Israelites was understanding that as God's people – as the people claimed by God through the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, as the people freed from slavery by a new kind of leader called by God, that as God's people they had a new identity. Forging this new identity was not instantaneous, and as they journey into the promised land they need to release aspects of the past and reshape their understanding of who they are – reshape their concept of self-reliance – reshape their concept of God, moving away from practices to appease an angry God to practices that offer gratitude for God's blessings and gifts.

This is such a fundamental part of our faith language that sometimes we gloss over it or forget just how radical it is. What we return to God is in gratitude for all God has done, not to earn a better seat at the table, not to get a bigger piece of the pie, not to earn or keep our salvation, but to recognize the abundance of God's love, the abundance of God's grace, the abundance God's care for each of us. To recognize that there is enough and that we have the assurance that God will provide because we see the ways God has provided throughout history. That there will be "enough." That we are "enough." That in our flaws and in our beauty, in our successes and in our failures, we are enough. The media might try to tell us

otherwise, but as people created in the image of God, we are enough. And while we are reformed and refined throughout our lives through prayer and worship and service, this shaping of our souls is to deepen our connection to God, rather than to seek God's blessing. We already are God's children – we belong to God in life and in death and in life beyond death - and we trust in God's care.

It can be too easy for us to get mired in the negative; for the Hebrew people to remember the misery of the decades of slavery and the decades of wandering through the wilderness. They – and we – need to be reminded that appreciation and gratitude must **be chosen**. That is not to say that we overlook the reality. This is not a Pollyanna-ish overexuberant thanksgiving, nor is it gushing gratitude to make ourselves look good. It is a gratitude that comes from deep inside bearing witness to the multiple stories that make up our lives. Our histories are complicated, with hills and valleys, twists and turns, strong faith along with doubts. The Hebrew people were faithful to God, except when they were not. And yet God was faithful throughout. Even when they were conquered and in exile, God did not abandon them. The people needed to be reminded over and over again to give thanks for this faithfulness. I think in particular it is in the face of multiple stories, of competing textures and of layers that don't line up neatly that we need to be reminded of the place of gratitude.

I've been pondering the challenges of multiple stories this week. On Tuesday, I gathered with a group interfaith clergy from the greater Lansing area to share a public letter of commitment and solidarity with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors and friends. This statement condemned hate speech and bigotry, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and offered our care and support. I shared a link to the statement and the press conference in the e-announcements. There are some copies available on the table just outside the sanctuary doors. This public affirmation complemented the letters individual churches sent to Congregation Shaarey Zadek, Congregation Kehillat Israel and the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing. I shared the statements sent by PCO via an email to the congregation two weeks ago. If you did not receive it, please let me know and I will make sure you receive a copy.

It has been a tremendous joy for me to participate in the Interfaith Clergy group. These colleagues have become friends. As we were gathered this past Thursday, I had such gratitude to God for the wisdom and grace of these faith leaders. Such gratitude for the shared laughter amidst tremendous suffering. Such gratitude for the patience and gentle teaching from Rabbi Matthew and Imam Sohail as they helped us find language that expressed our pain and our hope in ways that would be heard as support by their communities. To find language to share our resolve to mutually support the Jewish and Muslim communities in love even when the world is telling us to choose a side and protest in anger.

It is in the anguish and in the pain; through the fear and the unknown; in the thirst for righteousness and the hunger for justice that we are called to bear witness to God's

faithfulness. Even when we can't see the light ahead though the smoke of the buildings torn apart; even when we can't hear the sounds children singing through the shrieks of terror; even when our imaginations are stifled by the despair and we can't fathom a resolution to the heartbreak, we remember the words of Moses: "The Lord God made water flow for you from flint rock. The Lord God fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know. Remember the Lord your God." Remember the Lord your God and give thanks.

We are a people of grace and of gratitude. And as a people of grace and gratitude, our gratitude goes beyond words. It includes the posture of our daily life - the commitments of our financial resources and time and talent as we have dedicated this morning. And it includes living as a people of hope, living as a people who stand side by side and arm in arm with Muslim and Jewish neighbors, supporting them in their pain. This Thursday night at 7 pm at Eastminster Presbyterian Church, we will gather as an interfaith community, sharing our commitment to each other. As you are able, I hope you will attend this gathering. We are people of grace and gratitude. We are a people of peace. Join me prayer.