

February 21, 2010 The First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Romans 10:5-13

5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) 7"or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say?

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart"

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The Third Level

I'm no scholar. I don't have time to be. But I don't believe I have to be a major leaguer to enjoy tossing the ball around; and sometimes that's the way I am about scholarship. I like to play catch, but I'll never get to play for the Reds. In preparation for this morning's sermon, I found the Old Testament scriptures that Paul used in this 10th Chapter of Romans, and there are a lot of them. I thought that he must have used them in a way similar to the way I use scripture when I write or preach or both. After all, the Old Testament was *his* scripture; he was focused on a particular scripture-- my feeling is that he borrowed more from Deuteronomy 30 than other sources, although he touched down in Leviticus and Joel as well in this passage.

So the way I figure it, the Deuteronomy passage is level one; Romans is level two, and this sermon, entitled The Third Level, is, you guessed it-- level three.

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Level I is all about "Moses" in the Book of Deuteronomy.

This is the climax of the commanding final send up from that Book. Its one of three great speeches or sermons we can find there. Here's the situation: Moses had done his work, and his life had run its course. It is clear in Deuteronomy that nobody wanted more than Moses to see the legacy of his leadership he had lived out through obedience to the law of God. In fact "Moses" was pretty certain that the covenant could be made right again. All the people had to do was obey the law and Israel's God would keep his end of the bargain by *making sure that everything was OK for them.*

An issue for me is whether or not Moses actually said all of those words, (hence the quotes) and that there was a group of secretaries present to copy all of his words down on papyrus. Actually it may be more an issue for you than it is for me. I'm pretty certain that Moses didn't write this; and I am absolutely certain that it doesn't matter to me who did. My guess is that some historian during the reign of King Josiah wrote this great speech. But like I say, it doesn't matter who wrote it nearly as much as what was being said; for it is God throwing down the gauntlet, challenging his long ago people. Doesn't matter when.

Throughout the Scriptures of the Hebrews and later the Jews, we find the challenge of choice. What's it going to be, folks? God or the idols? It never goes away. It is as recent as our pulse or our breath. Sometimes it's just black and white, or as easy as a coin toss.

Sometimes it's not. One reason it's not is because we feign ignorance, claim we require more information, "Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us," or "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it" and educate us so we can make the informed choice? But it's not that hard, and deep inside we know it. "... the word is very

near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

It all reminded me of a remark that Jesus made some centuries later according to Luke, when “. . . Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming,” he said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you. (or among you)” In other words we can say we don’t know. We can say we need more information, but really, is that true? More importantly, is that the truth, in light of the quotation in Luke?

But why is this choice necessary?

Maybe because of our need for certainty and security. At the core of this teaching is the need for Israel to be secure, for individuals to be secure. This teaching provides a guarantee that if Israel does this, then God will do that. If Israel does not, then it’s anybody’s guess, and you’re probably not going to like that outcome much. If you ever wondered how badly you need to feel secure-- and came up with an honest answer, then you understand the need of the ancients-- which is no different from our own.

The commandment is in your mouth and heart. The kingdom is among you. There is your answer, your security. Here is the raw material Paul would pick up 600-700 years, or more, later.

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Level II is about Paul and his use of the Book of Deuteronomy.

By appealing to the Moses of Deuteronomy (and you can be pretty certain that whether I believe it or not, *Paul* believed that Moses spoke the words in Deuteronomy 30) Paul sought to bring the Jews on board. Why is that? Maybe because he felt insecure. Maybe he believed that he couldn’t hold up his end of the covenant. Maybe because he had known righteous, compassionate even holy people who suffered unjustly. Maybe he believed that there were no guarantees, at least not according to the old covenant. Where was that insurance? Where was that security? It had hinged on the ability and the willingness to live the perfect life according to the law. It wasn’t going to happen.

At some point he realized that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were dealing with the same issues he was. Imagine that! In his service to the temple hierarchy as one who persecuted Christians, Paul was privy to the earliest form of our doctrine and in it he found a meaningful answer: faith!

He was one of the Jews, and did not want to see them unsaved. Regardless of what you or I believe, Paul believed that his former friends were doomed. This is not unlike Luther who had no enmity against his fellow Christians (nearly all of whom were Roman Catholic in those days) he wanted the church to stop doing silly and dangerous things.

But whether it was, as Paul believed, fifteen or more centuries had passed; or as I believe, about six centuries had passed since the words attributed to Moses had been

written down centuries of developing tradition had passed. Generations of believers had come, made their contribution, and passed on. Paul was an inheritor of all that; and one thing more, he believed that he had experienced the presence of the risen Christ and with that the assurance that everything was going to be all right-- no matter what.

He walked away from the rigged game, the stacked deck where it was an impossibility to obey the laws perfectly. But wait a minute! If you believe that the Old Testament is tough, have you taken a recent look through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount? If you have, then you will recall that it is not enough to simply not murder, you'd better not even call somebody a nasty name. It's not enough to be physically faithful to your spouse. You'd better not even look at somebody else with cheating on your mind-- even if cheating is the last thing you would ever *do*.

Its pretty sure that even though Paul had been dead for fifteen or twenty years when those words were being fused into Matthew's Gospel, they were probably being said during Paul's lifetime. So I am guessing that Paul's conversion was very much like that of Martin Luther. Both men were very insecure because neither of them believed that salvation was possible for them and they were lost and hopeless and helpless.

Can any of us begin to imagine what it must have been like for Paul, or for Luther for that matter, to feel that lost?

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Level III is about us and the jump in time from the time of Paul to the time of now, of us: the sisters and brothers in Christ who compose the *Community of Faith Presbyterian Church*.

I mean really, what is in a name?

Modern times are full of difficulties. No big news there! But in some respects, things haven't changed much. For example, well and rightly told, the Christian faith is irresistible. We know we cannot escape the memory, the presence, and the predictability of failure and sin. We know we are imperfect. It is part of being mortal. Or as we are fond of saying, "I'm only human!"

We still see ourselves as God's creation and part of God's larger creation. The questions haven't changed in thousands of years, except maybe culture and environment framed them a little differently. It is important for us to know that the closing words of our childhood fairy tales stand beneath the magnifying glass of reality. How do we know we will, "live happily ever after"? What does it mean, after all to be saved? How credible is the faith of somebody like Paul who lived so long ago-- so far away who never sent an e-mail? And didn't even own a computer!

Today, as far as I can tell, faith is far more difficult, or maybe not, maybe it's just because I struggle with the notion of, "I believe, help my unbelief!" I want to be able to believe without proof. But the Bible is full of proof. I only sit in awe in my reading wondering what must have been going through the minds of Jesus' opponents if, as it is

written, miracle after miracle was being done? How could those opponents have thought anything apart from the idea that Jesus was holy? But I guess if we are threatened enough, we can turn a blind eye even to Jesus.

We live a long way from those old stories, but maybe that's for the best. If faith is our ticket to happily ever after, do we want our faith tarnished with facts? Better to have it shined up with truth!

One thing we all have is a life. Every life is its own story and if we pay attention we can find in our story some truth, and that truth is mostly about change, some call it growth. In one of his parables Jesus spoke of seeds planted, and of harvest. The time in between, well that was all a mystery. He said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."

We are left in the middle of mystery, for likewise, we do not know. But then knowledge is not what saves us. Everything finally is all about believing. It is all about faith.

Rev. Donald H. Smith