

"DRIVING DIRECTIONS!!"

A SERMON BASED ON THE OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY FROM THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY (30:15-20) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON APRIL 25, 2021-----THE FOURTH SUNDAY FOLLOWING EASTER SUNDAY

**ALTHOUGH I HAVE NOT PERSONALLY DONE SO --
- I SUSPECT THAT DRIVING A RENTAL CAR IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY IS A REAL TRIP. IF YOU CHOOSE TO DO THIS, YOU'RE LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE, AND MORE THAN LIKELY, YOU'RE GOING TO GET IT..... DEPENDING ON THE PLACE -- BE IT LONDON OR ROME OR BEIJING OR JUST ABOUT ANYWHERE --**

**IT CAN BE ANYTHING FROM A REASONABLE TO
A FRUSTRATING TO A HARROWING EXPERIENCE.**

**IN SOME COUNTRIES, DRIVERS MUST MOTOR ON
THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE ROAD. THEY ARE
PILOTING A VEHICLE THAT HAS THE STEERING
WHEEL ON WHAT WE THINK OF AS THE
PASSENGER SIDE, AND THEY HAVE TO SHIFT
WITH THE LEFT HAND..... IN PLACES LIKE THE
UNITED KINGDOM, THAILAND, HONG KONG AND
AUSTRALIA, DRIVERS MUST LOOK TO THE RIGHT
RATHER THAN THE LEFT WHEN ENTERING A
ROUNABOUT -----**

IN FACT, EVEN THAT TERM MAY BE UNFAMILIAR, SINCE THEY'RE USUALLY CALLED "TRAFFIC CIRCLES" IN THE UNITED STATES..... THERE MAY ALSO BE TRAFFIC LAWS IN WHICH WE ARE UNVERSED.

BUT BEYOND ALL THAT, A TOURIST DRIVING A RENTAL LIKELY IS NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY. THE SIGNAGE MAY BE IN A LANGUAGE THAT'S UNREADABLE, AND, EVEN IF IT ISN'T, AND THE EXIT ARROW POINTS TO KOLN AND ANOTHER TO HAMBURG, MOST FOREIGN VISITORS ARE UNLIKELY TO KNOW WHICH IS THE SOUTHERN OR NORTHERN DIRECTION.

**AND WHEN ARRIVING AT A FORK IN THE ROAD,
WHICH WAY DOES ONE GO?**

**THERE IS A SENSE IN WHICH THE PASSAGE
FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK CALLED
DEUTERONOMY BEFORE US TODAY CAN BE
THOUGHT OF AS FORK-IN-THE-ROAD
DIRECTIONS.**

**DEUTERONOMY AS A WHOLE IS PRESENTED AS
A SERMON BY MOSES TO THE PEOPLE OF
ISRAEL AS THEY ARE CAMPED ON THE FAR SIDE
OF THE JORDAN RIVER. THEY ANTICIPATE
CROSSING IT AND ENTERING THE PROMISED
LAND VERY SOON.**

THE PEOPLE HAVE NEVER BEEN IN CANAAN OR LIVED IN ANY SETTLED AREA.....INDEED ---- THE GENERATION THAT LEFT EGYPT AT THE TIME OF THE EXODUS HAS DIED IN THE WILDERNESS, AND THESE PEOPLE MOSES IS ADDRESSING ARE THEIR CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN AND GREAT GRANDCHILDREN, ALL BORN DURING THE 40-YEAR TREK TO CANAAN.

SO, TO CARRY ON THE METAPHOR, WE MIGHT SAY THAT THEY AREN'T FAMILIAR WITH THE RULES FOR NAVIGATING LIFE IN THE PROMISED LAND.....

**SO MOSES, IN WHAT IS THE CLIMAX OF HIS
SERMON, AND WHOSE OWN DEATH IS IMMINENT,
PUTS PLAINLY TO THEM THAT THEY ARE AT A
FORK: "I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND
DEATH, BLESSINGS AND CURSES."**

**ONE WAY IS LIFE AND BLESSINGS; THE OTHER IS
DEATH AND CURSES. AND THERE'S NO
QUESTION ABOUT WHICH DIRECTION MOSES
WANTS THE PEOPLE TO GO: "CHOOSE LIFE," HE
SAYS "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.”

IT'S WORTH OUR TIME TO NOTE THAT THE HEBREW WORD FOR "BLESSING" DENOTES THE POWER OF LIFE TO EXPAND AND FLOURISH IN ALL WAYS..... THERE IS SOME NOTION OF THAT IDEA IN ALL CULTURES, BUT IN ISRAEL, BLESSING IS NOT "A SORT OF FREE-FLOATING LIFE FORCE," NOTES ONE COMMENTATOR -- BUT SOMETHING "LINKED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE LORD.”

CONVERSELY, THE HEBREW FOR "CURSE," IS A COMPLETE DEPRIVATION OF BLESSING. IT IS ENFEEBLEMENT. IT IS EXISTENCE WITHOUT THE EXPANSION AND FLOURISHING THAT IS IMPLIED IN BLESSING.

SO HERE THE PEOPLE ARE PRESENTED WITH A CLEAR-CUT CHOICE, AND THERE'S NO THIRD OPTION. NOT TO CHOOSE THE WAY OF BLESSING IS TO CHOOSE THE WAY OF CURSE.

**THERE IS ALWAYS A DANGER, OF COURSE,
WHEN PLAYING WITH METAPHORS, THAT THE
INTENDED COMPARISON WILL TRIVIALIZE
SOMETHING THAT IS FAR MORE SIGNIFICANT
THAN THE IMAGERY SUGGESTS, AND THAT'S
CERTAINLY POSSIBLE HERE..... *MOSES WAS
NOT SAYING TO THE ISRAELITES THAT TODAY
THEY HAD THIS CHOICE TO MAKE, AND THAT
TOMORROW THERE'D BE ANOTHER CHOICE OF
EQUAL IMPORTANCE. HE WAS NOT SAYING THAT
AFTER THIS FORK THERE'S TO BE ANOTHER AND
ANOTHER.***

RATHER, HE WAS SAYING THAT THIS WAS THE
PRIMARY CHOICE UPON WHICH EVERYTHING
ELSE IN THEIR LIVES DEPENDED. THE CHOICE
THEY MAKE, HE SAYS, CHANGES EVERYTHING!

DURING A LATER ERA IN JUDAH'S HISTORY
(AFTER THE SCROLL OF DEUTERONOMY HAD
DROPPED OUT OF SIGHT AND BEEN
FORGOTTEN), KING JOSIAH ORDERED A REPAIR
OF THE TEMPLE..... DURING THE WORK, THE
HIGH PRIEST FOUND A SCROLL, WHICH BIBLE
SCHOLARS CONCLUDE WAS ALL OR PART OF
DEUTERONOMY, AND IT WAS TAKEN TO THE
KING TO WHOM IT WAS READ.

WHEN HE HEARD WHAT DEUTERONOMY SAID,
"HE TORE HIS CLOTHES" (2 KINGS 22:11), A
COMMON EXPRESSION OF GRIEF, FOR HE
RECOGNIZED HOW FAR HIS PEOPLE WERE FROM
THE WAY OF BLESSING THAT THE SCROLL
DESCRIBED.

THAT'S THE KIND OF IMPORTANCE THIS TEXT
BEARS, AND THE DECISION TO WHICH IT CALLS
US IS CLEAR-CUT. YES, WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT
"GRAY AREAS" AND "AMBIGUOUS SITUATIONS,"
BUT MOSES, HAVING HEARD THE WORD OF THE
LORD, WILL HAVE NONE OF IT.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS AND ONLY TWO WAYS,
HE DECLARES -- GOD'S WAY AND THE OTHER
WAY -- AND WE HAVE TO CHOOSE.

THIS IS NOT JUST AN OLD TESTAMENT THING.

ACTUALLY, JESUS SAID THE SAME THING IN

OTHER WORDS: "WHOEVER IS NOT WITH ME IS

AGAINST ME, AND WHOEVER DOES NOT GATHER

WITH ME SCATTERS" (MATTHEW 12:30). NO

MIDDLE GROUND OR THIRD WAY IS OFFERED.

THEN, TOO, YOU MIGHT RECALL PETER'S

ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE RULING AUTHORITIES

IN JERUSALEM FOLLOWING HIS ARREST

SHORTLY AFTER PENTECOST:

**"WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN ANY
HUMAN AUTHORITY" (ACTS 5:29). IT WAS GOD'S
WAY OR NO WAY.**

**THUS IT WOULD BE A TRIVIALIZATION OF THE
TEXT TO INTERPRET IT AS "MAKING GOOD
CHOICES IS A SECRET TO A MEANINGFUL AND
HAPPY LIFE." WHILE THERE'S TRUTH IN THE
STATEMENT ITSELF, THAT'S *NOT* WHAT IS GOING
ON HERE. WHAT MOSES IS SAYING IS NO
SECRET, BUT IT'S ALSO NO MERE SUGGESTION
OR PROGRAM FOR SUCCESS.**

**DEUTERONOMY IS NOT A SELF-HELP BOOK OR
PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT MANUAL, AND MOSES
IS NOT A LIFE COACH.... HE'S TALKING ABOUT
THE PRIMARY DECISION THAT DEFINES ALL
THAT WE ARE: WILL WE BE GOD'S PERSON OR
WON'T WE? THAT'S THE CHOICE.**

**MOSES IS TELLING HIS PEOPLE -- AND US AS
READERS OF DEUTERONOMY -- THAT THERE
ARE MORAL ABSOLUTES IN LIFE, THAT CERTAIN
THINGS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT AND OTHER THINGS
ARE ALWAYS WRONG. THERE IS A CLARITY AND
ABSOLUTENESS ABOUT THE LAWS OF GOD IN
THIS LIFE THAT WE ARE SOMETIMES RELUCTANT
TO ADMIT.**

**YES, THERE ARE SOME THINGS ABOUT GOD'S
WAYS THAT ARE UNCLEAR TO US, AND WE DO
ENCOUNTER SOME PROBLEMS WHERE THE
RIGHT DIRECTION IS NOT ALTOGETHER
APPARENT..... BUT, BY AND LARGE, THERE'S
NOTHING AMBIGUOUS ABOUT GOD'S WAY,
COMPARED TO OUR WAY OR THE WAY OF THE
WORLD. NO AMBIGUITY AT ALL.**

***FOR MOSES, THERE IS NO GRAY AREA..... NOT
HERE..... NO FUZZINESS IN THIS PARTICULAR
TEXT..... MOSES' MESSAGE IS STRONG AND
STRAIGHTFORWARD. THERE CAN BE NO
MISTAKING HIS INTENT. HIS DIRECTION IS
CLEAR.***

***ONE CHOICE AND ONLY ONE CHOICE IS THE
CORRECT CHOICE AND THE CHOICE WHICH WILL
RESULT IN BLESSING.***

**THERE ARE TWO WORDS MOSES USES HERE
THAT ARE KEYS TO THE READING. ONE OF THEM
IS "OBEY" AND THE OTHER IS "LOVE," AND
MOSES LINKS THEM BOTH WITH BLESSING -- "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.”**

**GRANTED, OBEDIENCE IS NOT A VERY POPULAR
IDEA TODAY. WE'D RATHER KEEP OUR OPTIONS
OPEN AND OPT FOR THE OPPOSITE OF
OBEDIENCE -- FREEDOM. BUT THE THING IS,
*OBEDIENCE AND FREEDOM ARE DIRECTLY
CONNECTED....* AS U.S. CITIZENS, FOR EXAMPLE,
WE HAVE FREEDOM, BUT ONLY WITHIN THE
BOUNDS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND THE LAWS
OF THE LAND.**

FREEDOM WITH NO FETTERS AT ALL, OF COURSE, LEADS TO TROUBLE, AND WE'RE LIKELY TO LOSE OUR FREEDOM.

IN THE SAME WAY, IF WE STAY WITHIN THE WHITE LINES ON GOD'S HIGHWAY, WE ARE FREE TO LIVE WITHOUT MORAL GUILT AND FREE TO MAKE ALL KINDS OF PERSONAL CHOICES THAT ENHANCE OUR HAPPINESS..... BUT, IF WE TAKE A SIDE ROAD OR A BACK ROAD, A ROAD WE DEEM MORE SCENIC OR EXCITING, THE BROAD ROAD RATHER THAN THE NARROW ROAD, IT'S OVER.

WE WILL FIND THAT IT'S A ROAD STREWN WITH LITTER AND NAILS, AND WE'RE GOING TO COME TO A DEAD END WITH AN EMPTY GAS TANK AND A FLAT TIRE OR TWO.

THE LATE PREACHER AND AUTHOR EUGENE PETERSON NOTES, "DEUTERONOMY IS FULL OF COMMANDS. A COMMAND IS A WORD THAT CALLS US TO LIVE BEYOND WHAT WE PRESENTLY UNDERSTAND OR FEEL OR WANT. ... EVERYONE HAS CHOICES TO MAKE. THE CHOICES ARE NOT TRIAL-AND-ERROR GUESSES; THEY ARE INFORMED BY THE COMMANDS OF GOD.

**THESE COMMANDS DO NOT RESTRICT A
NATURAL FREEDOM; THEY CREATE THE
CONDITIONS OF FREEDOM.”**

**PETERSON GOES ON TO POINT OUT THAT *THE
FIRST WORD ADDRESSED TO ADAM BY HIS
CREATOR IS A COMMAND, WHICH IS FOUND IN
GENESIS 1:28: "BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY,
AND FILL THE EARTH AND SUBDUE IT"***

**"COMMANDS," PETERSON SAYS, "ASSUME
FREEDOM AND ENCOURAGE RESPONSE.**

**ADDRESSED BY COMMANDS, WE ARE TRAINED
IN RESPONSE-ABILITY.”**

THE OTHER KEY WORD IN DEUTERONOMY IS "LOVE." MOSES SAYS THAT CHOOSING LIFE AND BLESSING MEANS THAT HIS PEOPLE WILL LOVE GOD, WALK IN GOD'S WAYS AND OBSERVE GOD'S COMMANDMENTS..... AND THIS LOVE IS A TWO-WAY STREET.

AGAIN, TO QUOTE PETERSON, "DEUTERONOMY PRESENTS GOD IN A LOYAL, COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE WITH HIS PEOPLE. GOD IS NOT A RANDOM THOUGHT. GOD IS NOT A WORD TO FILL IN THE GAPS OF WHAT WE DON'T KNOW. GOD IS ACTIVELY, ENERGETICALLY DEALING WITH PEOPLE IN LOVE. LOVE IS THE KEY AND CHARACTERISTIC WORD IN THE BOOK.

**THIS LOVE IS BOTH GOD'S CHARACTER AND HIS
COMMAND. BECAUSE WE ARE UNDER THIS KIND
OF GOD, THERE IS NO LIVING WORTH THE NAME
THAT IS NOT A PARTICIPATION IN THAT LOVE.”**

**WE SHOULD NOTE, TOO, THAT AS MOSES USES
THE WORD "LOVE" THROUGHOUT
DEUTERONOMY, IT IS ALWAYS AN ACTION,
NEVER SIMPLY A FEELING.**

**GOD'S LOVE IN ACTION DELIVERED THE
HEBREWS FROM EGYPT. ISRAEL'S LOVE FOR
GOD -- AND OUR LOVE FOR GOD -- IS ALSO TO
BE ACTIVE, AND DEMONSTRATED THROUGH
OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S COMMANDMENTS.**

AND SO, AT SOME POINT, WE SIT, MOTORS
IDLING, AT A FORK, AND IN TRUTH, THERE ARE
REALLY ONLY TWO CHOICES: GOD'S WAY OR
THE OTHER WAY. AS BIBLICAL COMMENTATOR
WILLIAM BARCLAY SAYS, "... ALL LIFE
CONCENTRATES ON [US] AT THE CROSSROADS."

AND HERE ARE THE DRIVING DIRECTIONS: SO
LISTEN CAREFULLY:

TURN ONTO GOD'S WAY.

PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN