

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Knowing Where we Came From”

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Deuteronomy 4:1-9

August 30, 2009

The moment of Deuteronomy 4 isn't just a dusty, remote, archaic echo from the corners of the ancient history of Israel in scripture. Moses gathers the Israelites on the banks of the east side of the Jordan River—just across that little river from the land promised to them, their true home—and gives the speech that is the whole book of Deuteronomy, which is arguably the most important book in the Old Testament. It is the most quoted in the New Testament. It's like a combination of Acts and Romans of the Old Testament—story and theology. And story as theology. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, just when they must be eager to take the last steps on their journey to the promised land, this people, who are so prone to act first and think later, are made to pause and remember who they are, to reflect on where they've come from, and celebrate the One who brought them there and would go with them into the future. This wasn't just any moment. It was an occasion for celebration, reflection, and commitment at a key moment in Israel's history. Some of that history is retold in the first three chapters of Deuteronomy—the beginning of Moses' speech, just prior to our text this morning, and we'll take some time this morning to hear a retelling of that history along with Israel. Knowing where we came from and remembering who we are is intertwined in the bible with hearing what we should do and not do as we go forward.

Think of it like a great locker room pre-game speech by the old embattled coach, one last game before retirement, gathering his players before they run out onto the field for the championship, the team brought together to hear one last motivational speech with everything on the line. With everything behind them and everything in front of them. The old coach draws on every experience they have had together—their successes and failures, their trials and victories—and reminds them of what is most important to remember as they set out for what's next.

This speech on the lips of Moses, Deuteronomy, is the capstone of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament that tell the story of God choosing first Abraham and then his offspring Isaac, and Jacob and his children and children's children—the people of Israel—to be God's light to the world. This was God's way of bringing redemption and hope to a whole world that had gone dark since Adam's fall. “You will be my people and I will be your God,” He had told them.

These first few books of the Bible tell us how things didn't always work out too smoothly for the chosen people of God. Things were so hard for them that it makes you wonder whether you really want to hear God say, “I choose you.” They had traveled to Egypt a long time ago, intending to stay there for a while, while the drought and famine passed back home, but their host, the Pharaoh of Egypt, died while they were there and the new Pharaoh made them his slaves.

Over 400 years they and their children and children's children worked as slaves in Egypt away from their homeland and their purpose as the people of God. But then God appeared to a young man and told him that he would be the one through whom God

would rescue Israel from slavery. So reluctant Moses did what he was told, confronted Pharaoh, and miraculously led the people out from slavery into the wilderness.

These people, largely bereft of a relationship with God for many generations, hardened by the experience of slavery, were glad to not be slaves anymore, but not overjoyed at the prospect of walking through the desert. What did you do, Moses, bring us out here to starve and die of thirst? What's your plan, hero? We'd rather be back in Egypt where at least we can eat cucumbers. Like their ancestor Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of porridge, they were willing to trade freedom for cucumbers. No wonder they were called stiff-necked.

But they trudged on until they came to Mount Sinai. Moses left them at the base of the mountain while he went up. For 40 days Moses neither ate nor drank as he prayed to God and asked God's direction. While he was doing that, the people down below, led by Moses own brother, got antsy. Maybe it was because they worked on Pharaoh's statues and temples and palaces all those years, but they had lost trust in a deity you can't see and touch. Without Moses around to point them to their God, they got nervous, so they melted their gold earrings and necklaces, and someone fashioned all of that into a golden calf. Then, they bowed down to it. They worshipped it—the golden calf—and said it was their god who brought them out of Egypt. Strange, huh? People who have been delivered and sustained by God now giving their allegiance to something so surely not God—but the work of their own hands. Sadly, it wouldn't be the last time. Just a short while before this speech of Deuteronomy, they camped in a place called Shittim, in the land of Moab, and began to worship the god of the Moabites, called Baal Peor. That wouldn't be the last time either. Throughout their history, many of the Israelites flirted with other deities, giving their devotion to things that were not God. Much later than Deuteronomy, Isaiah mocks them, asking about the wood and stone that they bow down before—what kind of god is that? He asks.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that this issue right here—the tendency to turn to other things besides God for comfort, for purpose, for anything is a repetitive behavior for God's people. We turn to other things so quickly. Many centuries after Moses, the life of Jesus would demonstrate what a radical obedience to God looks like and sounds like.

It's not an accident that the 10 commandments begin with "I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before Me." Everything else builds on that. Everything. The one who brought you out of Egypt? It wasn't a golden calf, Ra or Baal or Asherah, or Jupiter, or Zeus, or Artemis. It wasn't Rome, or Wall Street or Washington. It wasn't the bank or the diploma. It wasn't your money, not your power, not your strength, not your legacy, not anything else that claims any sort of devotion from you. It was Me. And I'm jealous for you. You shall have nothing else before Me that replaces Me as the center of your devotion, worship, and purpose in life.

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw them there, dancing around and bowing down to this statue—he'd only been gone a few weeks, he was livid and terrified. He threw down the two tablets he was carrying, destroyed the golden calf and returned on the mountain for another 40 days to seek God's forgiveness for the people. And God gave it, again—both forgiveness and the commandments.

The people soon left there to go toward the Promised Land. It was an eleven-day journey. They finally arrived on the south side of the land. God, now acknowledged as their God, told them to go on in and take it. Now's the time. But the people weren't so sure. They sent spies into the land, which came back with, "I've got good news and I've got bad news." The good news is that the land is great—fruit, crops, soil, animals. The bad news is that giants live there—really big people—The Amorites.

What would they do? In spite of the hope of the promise of the good land, in spite of Moses' assurance that God was with them and would lead them, in spite of their experience of God's deliverance from slavery and sustenance in the wilderness. In spite of all of this, their fear was stronger. "We will not do it. The Lord hates us and brought us here to die. Those people are too big and strong for us." Just saying You are my God is not the same thing as saying I am Yours.

Ok, God said. Have it your way. Just turn around now and head back. I'm done with this generation. None of you except for Joshua and Caleb, not even you, Moses, will enter the land I promised you. Have fun in the desert. Oh no, the people said, we'll do it. Too late. No we'll go. See, here's our armor, and our swords. Here we go. It's too late. They went. And were slaughtered. Without God's help, they were slaughtered and driven back into the desert. Where they wandered from place to place for 40 years.

A journey that should have only taken 11 days, took 40 years because they would not listen, they would not trust God. It's one thing to say creedally "you are my God." It's another thing to say, I will put nothing in front of you, not even my own ideas and plans. To have no other gods before Me is more than a creedal confession of the one God whom we serve. It calls for a radical obedience to the God you serve and a trust in God's way, truth, and life.

It's no wonder that 40 years later when, now an old and seasoned Moses on the banks of the Jordan River, stands before them, he stresses, "Now, Israel, listen to what I'm teaching you and do it that you may live and go in to the future God has promised you." Moses reminds them of their past and tells them what is at stake in their future. In spite of their failures to be faithful, their wandering hearts, their feet of clay, God's message was still "I will be your God and you shall be My people."

Through Jesus we are inheritors of this grace. This is our story—we are all people who sin and suffer the consequences of our disobedience, who are invited into a life with God, and for whom God is patient and kind and faithful, even when we struggle to be. We are, in all sorts of ways, some we might admit, other ways we might not admit so easily, undeserving of the mercy of God. And yet, we find ourselves the recipients of an invitation from God through Christ—an invitation in Christ given to all people everywhere—not just one nation, one people, but all people everywhere no matter who they are or what they've done, or how they have wandered from God—this invitation to the life of God is offered to us through Christ. God invites us to come to new life in Christ with this word, "I will be your God. Come and be my people."