

A Word About Today's Word: Deuteronomy

Over the course of several hundred years, Israel is transformed from a dozen herding tribes, scattered, and wandering, into a substantial nation. She has military, economic, political, and social status on a global scale. Possession of deeply productive lands is at the heart of her prosperity.

The first four books of the Pentateuch, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers*, recount a movement from infancy to maturity. The heart of this nation is undergirded in the covenant of God, people, land, and environment living in mutuality with one another.

But superpowers have other plans.

It happens in two phases. First, in the Eighth Century BCE, Assyria conquers and annexes the Northern Kingdom of Israel. About 150 years later, in the Sixth Century BCE, Babylon conquers and annexes the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The land, once promised to Abram and all his descendants, is no longer a reality. And the Temple that once housed the presence of YHWH is no longer standing. How then, do we worship God, and how then do we remain in covenant, when we reside in a foreign land?

Enter *Deuteronomy*, the last book of the Pentateuch, and the bridge to an Israel beyond exile.

I mentioned that the Northern Kingdom falls first. This is a wakeup call for the Southern Kingdom. King Josiah implements reforms, most notably, the centralization of the Temple Cult. Jerusalem becomes the

only place to officially worship YHWH, and YHWH becomes the only recognized God. The people move to a more rigid monotheism.

Josiah's shift to centralized religion is innovative for its time. There's no doubt this move allows for more control and consolidation of the region. He even expands the nation's footprint back into some of the areas annexed by Assyria. But the change is not without its problems. It marginalizes regional shrines, and especially the priests who make a living servicing those shrines. It also outlaws long-held traditions, and rapidly. It's the same kind of instant effect a significant Supreme Court ruling has in our country.

Bolstered by the claim of finding a long-lost scroll, one that was more than likely created and planted by his own scribes, Josiah implemented his reforms. *We've recovered this information, and the nation must repent and revise its ways.* Therefore, *Deuteronomy* is the farewell homily of Moses.

In this homily, Moses recounts the giving of the law from YHWH to Israel. Recounting is the important verb. There's already been plenty of law provided in *Exodus* and *Leviticus*. In narrative time, *Deuteronomy* is forty years after the Exodus event. The authors use the time lapse to redact and revise the law in ways that will support Josiah's centralization efforts.

There's a second, equally important change, most likely implemented by the Priestly writers who gave the Pentateuch its final form well after the exile. Josiah's scribes write *Deuteronomy* in the Seventh Century BCE as a new covenant that includes a history of the monarchy. Mainly, a people that lives in covenant with YHWH ensures that God's presence will dwell in the Temple, and keep Israel safe. In other words, don't

repeat the sins of the Northern Kingdom. Such a narrative is all fine and well until your own country is conquered, and your lands and temple disappear.

The final form of *Deuteronomy*, completed after the exile, focuses less on God's promise of land, and more on God's promise of connection. Moses will not enter the land that has been promised. Like the generations in exile, and even those returned to an occupied Jerusalem, the land of promise is now in the future. Therefore, Torah, an ongoing collaboration of communal empathy and compassion, becomes the thing Israel clings to.

Like the ancient writers that precede us, we're invited into the complex challenge of discerning history, and reconciling its events with our own understanding of divine intentions. To be sure, the ancient writers, and we the current participants, will not get everything right. There's plenty to give us pause in *Deuteronomy*, just as I imagine there's plenty to give us pause in our own personal correspondences and reflections. But it shouldn't be lost on us, that one of the core messages of this work is care and concern for neighbors – we have a responsibility to protect orphan, widow, stranger, and any present manifestation of vulnerability. And I'll be honest with you, I have no desire to inhabit a new land or construct a new temple, if our cultivation and worship are not rooted in love for one another. Good friends, may we love God and one another in the present in order that we might build a good and proper land for our children.

Homily: Pole-vaulting

I ran track in high school during my freshman and sophomore years. There wasn't much memorable about our team performances, and there was even less memorable about my individual performances. I ran the distance events, and if you aren't very good at those events, it's like forever being out of breath and making a constant left-hand turn.

All of this is to say that I had plenty of time to observe other things. One of those things was our pole-vaulting team. Not being a particularly good track team, our school was short on funding and resources. Our poles were stiff and rigid. In even more short supply were young men and women strong enough to bend those rigid poles. If there's anything that gives solace to slow runners, it's seeing other uncoordinated kinfolk swing awkwardly on a ten-foot pole. One day, our teammate Greg finally got his pole to bend, a reflection of his hard work and dedication. But the pole was so old and so rotten, it shattered, and Greg's foray into flight was short-lived.

During the Spring of my sophomore year, we traveled to a meet at South Rowan High School. They happened to have an accomplished pole vaulter, a regional champion if memory serves. To watch him was poetry in motion: strength, and grace, and patience, and perfect timing. The pole bent to his will, and then propelled him over the bar in a perfect arching motion, and he landed softly on the padding. I am still in awe of the presence and fluidity of that moment.

Our text this morning recounts a famous prayer: the Shema, from *Deuteronomy*. We are urged to love God with heart, soul, and might. Jesus suggested we include our minds as well. Jesus also implores us to love neighbor. His exhortations are rooted in *Deuteronomy*.

Too often, I believe we assume that the only way we can love God (and neighbor) with heart, soul, mind, and strength is through grand gestures. But really, I think the commandment calls us to do something ordinary, tedious even: it calls us to be present and consistent. Don't stop there! Remind yourself of this calling by telling your kids, writing yourself post-It notes, reciting it when you wake and before you sleep. Even put it on your house flag. Engrain it in your very being.

I can't help but think about that pole vaulter. I am sure at first, he wanted to bend the pole with more violent or forceful motions. He would do grand things to get grand results. Maybe, just like Greg, he learned that such motions would only snap the pole. Eventually, he learned to channel his strength with patience, consistency, and purpose. He worked hard, every day, I am sure of it, to apply tension to a rigid line. At some point, his motions became fluid and effortless. His was a collection of little things – balance, speed, coordination, sight, timing, repetition, strength training, etc. – that added up to something greater. And eventually he took flight.

I wish, with all of my heart, and my mind, and my strength, and my soul, that I could just do something grand enough, big enough, right-now enough to heal the woundedness of this world. Every single bit of it. But I don't think that's how the world actually works, and I don't think that's how I've been created. And to be quite honest, my anxiousness to fix might do more breaking than mending.

But I do know this. Loving God and neighbor with my heart, and my mind, and my strength, and my soul, each and every day, no matter how futile it might seem in the hardest of seasons, doing this creates the kind of applied tension that bends the rigid lines of brokenness. It's the tension of support that straightens, and directs, and buoys over

time. And when we bend the line in community, the tension grows more pronounced and more substantial.

God calls us to create a sense of pressure. Not a piercing pressure. It's more like a hand gently soothing the chest of a fussy infant. Or the support of a brace that strengthens a sore knee or aching back. Or perhaps the pressure, force really, of presence in relationships with one another.

Deuteronomy, as human as you and me, as clear and clumsy as you and me, as faithfully and unfaithfully as you and me, calls us to apply the gentle pressure of our lives upon the world God has created. May ours be the kind of tension that ultimately propels us over and beyond our possibilities.

Amen.