

“Confirming Our Covenant with God”

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18

I have come to hold a deeper appreciation for the book of Deuteronomy as I have continued to walk along my faith journey. Not only does it contain some wonderful imagery about Moses' struggle as Israel's first leader but it also contains a wonderful message for us as people of faith as well. Over and over again, one simple phrase gets repeated time and time again. Line after line, verse after verse, chapter after chapter, Moses is constantly telling the people, “Never forget God, your God.” Time and time again, Moses is saying to the people, “Remember God, your God.” Verse after verse, chapter after chapter, Moses is reminding the people, “Don't forget God, your God.” And as Moses is saying this one phrase over and over again, he is also reminding the people that God is not just any god. God is the God who heard their cries while they were slaves in Egypt. God is the God who took on Pharaoh and brought the people out of Egypt. God is the God who led them through the wilderness, who guided them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God is the God who heard the people's cry for water and brought forth water from the rocks. God is the God who heard the people's stomachs rumbling and sent bread from heaven. God is the God who brought the people into the promise land, a land where milk and honey flow, where goodness abounds.

With each line, with each example, by repeating that one phrase, Moses is calling the people to remember God, their God. Moses wants the people to remember that God had chosen this rag tag bunch of people to be God's people. He wants them to remember that God had never failed them yet. Moses wants the people to remember that all the goodness that they were getting ready to experience is because God is their God. And in response to all that goodness, the people should give thanks and praise to God.

Really what better great and faith-filled message is there than that! It sounds certainly just right up our alley for Thanksgiving Sunday, right? In fact, we all might even be saying to ourselves, just like the people of Israel did to Moses, "We can take the hint, preacher. We get it. We need to remember our God, who acted in the past to bless us. This certainly seems to be an appropriate message for us as we prepare to gather round our tables. As we enjoy the goodness of life, remember that all things come from our God. It sounds perfect for Thanksgiving right?"

Well, that's where I was hoping to go for this sermon but as I am coming to discover, sometimes where I want to go and where the Spirit leads are not exactly the same thing. All week, it's been another part of Deuteronomy that has been drawing my attention.

This other part happens right before the people were getting ready to cross over into the promise land. At first glance, this text really has nothing to do with

Thanksgiving or so I thought. I'd like to read a bit of it for you and please feel free to follow along. I'll be looking at a reading from Deuteronomy 31.

GOD spoke to Moses: "You're about to die and be buried with your ancestors. You'll no sooner be in the grave than this people will be up and whoring after the foreign gods of this country that they are entering. They will abandon me and violate my Covenant that I've made with them

¹⁹⁻²¹ "But for right now, copy down this song and teach the People of Israel to sing it by heart. They'll have it then as my witness... When I bring them into the land that I promised to their ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey, and they eat and become full and get fat and then begin fooling around with other gods and worshiping them, and then things start falling apart, many terrible things happening, this song will be there with them as a witness to who they are and what went wrong. Their children won't forget this song; they'll be singing it. Don't think I don't know what they are already scheming to do, and they're not even in the land yet, this land I promised them."

I know not at all Thanksgiving-y but as I discovered and what this text taught me is that our Thanksgiving celebrations should go beyond just thanking our God. They should also remind us that we are called to experience the goodness of God in our lives as well.

Let me explain: In this part of the text, God starts out by pulling Moses aside and saying, "Just to let you know. Now let me stop right there. We know the conversation is never good when it starts out with, "Just to let you know". Okay, back to the story...

So God pulls Moses aside and says, "Just to let you know, you aren't crossing over to the promise land. You didn't pay attention to what I said. I told you to lift your arms to bring water forth. You struck a rock. So no promise land for you, Moses. In fact, you are going to die up here on this mountain, with the

promise land in sight. Sorry for that. And oh by the way, before you are even cold in your grave, the people are going to forget all about me. They will abandon the covenant and violate the Ten Commandments. Just thought I would let you know. Okay, Thanks. Bye.” Stunned silence is the reaction we get from Moses at this point in the story.

God, in just a few seconds, right before Moses dies, tears down Moses’ life work. All of it, forty years in the desert, having to listen to the people complain day after day, the work of chiseling the Ten Commandments, not once but twice, all of it, in that moment Moses learns, all of it isn’t going to do a single thing to transform the people. None of it is going to change the people’s behavior and help them become the people God created them and called them to be.

In that moment, Moses finds out that as soon as the people cross over into the promise land, they are going to forget their God. Talk about depressing.

Here at this wonderfully, long-awaited moment for Moses and the people, this moment of happiness and excitement, with the promise land was in sight, God has to go and be a negative Nancy by saying, “Oh by the way, thanks for all you did but you are going to die without crossing over into the promise land. And on top of all that, guess what, the people are going to forget all about me and start thinking that they got here to the promise land, the land of milk and honey, all by

themselves without any help or guidance from me. They are going to forget all about me.”

At this point, we can almost hear Moses saying, “Well, thanks a lot God! That’s real helpful and hopeful. What do you expect me to do about it? I’ll be dead!”

Now, I’ll admit once again this probably wasn’t the uplifting Thanksgiving message you were expecting today and if I’m being perfectly honest, it wasn’t the Thanksgiving message I was planning on giving either. It really is kind of depressing. No cornucopias full of God’s blessings. No celebrating the abundance of God’s blessings. No leftover turkey hash.

All we get for Thanksgiving is a sad depressing story of the people of God’s failure to be the community of faith once again. Where is the thanksgiving in that? Where is the joy and blessing in that?

Sure, I’m not denying that this is an unusual text for Thanksgiving but what I love about this story is that in response to Moses’ question, “What do you expect me to do about it? God simply responds by saying, “Nothing. I’ve got this.”

As I pondered this strange and yes weird direction that the Spirit of God was leading me, I began to realize that this story was not about what God expects us to do. It really is about what God is going to do to be in relationship with us as God’s people. This story truly becomes a Thanksgiving blessing for us because it

transforms our expectations about our relationship with God. The relationship is not just one sided. The relationship is more complex than that. Both sides are called to work on it, each giving, each getting. This story becomes opportunity for us to reclaim and reframe our covenant with God which at the heart of the matter is exactly what our time of Thanksgiving should be about as the people of God.

Yes, We know that Thanksgiving is a time where we lift up our thanks for the blessings of God in our lives. But Thanksgiving should also be a time for reflection and for renewing our covenant with God. Thanksgiving is a time for us to realize and celebrate that we didn't get here all by ourselves. It is a time when we also realize that we couldn't have made it here on our own either. We simply aren't that talented or gifted.

Thanksgiving becomes a wake up call for us as the people of God. It is a time for us to realize and celebrate that this whole time we have been and we continue to be surrounded by a community of faith who loves us and supports us. And more importantly, this whole time we have also been and continue to be guided by, loved by, cared for by our wonderfully, life-transforming and life-giving God.

The goodness that we have experienced in our lives is not just because we are God's. It is also because that goodness is a sign, a symbol of how much God cares for us and how far God will go to be in relationship with us as God's people.

In reality our times of thanksgiving is a time for us to transform our expectations and embrace that we are called to behave like the people of God at all times. And one of the ways we can do that is confirming our covenant with God as God's people. A time when we say yes, God we know you love us. You have shown us that in so many ways and now we give you a promise. We are in this thing, this relationship completely as well. Not just a little bit but with our whole hearts, our whole bodies, our whole minds and our whole souls as well.

As we gather around the table, as we break bread with one another, as we continue to experience the presence of God in our lives, the beauty of it is that we are constantly reminded that God is our center, our very reason for being. At our tables, when we are surrounded by the many blessings of family, friends, food, love, welcome, we are constantly reminded that we are connected with God. And by being connected with God, we are connected to one another through something that is so much bigger than just you and me.

As God's children, named and claimed, We are connected and called to be in relationship with all of God's people, people we meet every day and people with whom we may never met, people like the farmers who farmed the fields to grow our food, people like the ones who transported our food to the stores, people like the ones who run the stores where we buy our food. At our tables, we are reminded of our covenant with God, a covenant that connects us to all of God's creation.

And this covenant is not just any covenant. It is not just any agreement. This covenant goes beyond just seeing to our well-being. This covenant describes “what God does for us and what God does among us.” When God entered into covenant with the people of God, God poured out God’s own life for us. God shared God’s goodness with us. In this covenant, we get what God is for us: love, grace, peace, mercy, hope.

In this covenant, God shared God’s very essence with us generously and graciously and we are called to do the same. Thanksgiving becomes a time, not just when we remember what God has done for us. It also becomes a time when we experience the very essence of God and are called to share that goodness with others by reclaiming our commitment to become the people that God created us to be once more. That’s what God was saying up there on that mountaintop to Moses. “I’ve got this Moses” God knows that we can’t do it all on our own. God knows that we can’t bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth all on our own. We need a lot of help and that help comes from God.

Even at the moment, when God handed over the worst news possible to Moses, God knew what God was doing. God knew that the people of God were fickle and let’s face it, we haven’t changed much over the years. We have this bad habit of thinking that when life is good, we can do things on our own until...our

world flips upside down and we don't know which way is up. In those moments our first reaction is to come crawling back to God.

From the beginning of time, the people of God have always behaved just like that. So God wasn't really surprised that God was saying all this negative stuff, like the people are going to forget me once they cross over into the promise, all this stuff that was depressing to Moses. It was simply reality to God.

But here is where the language of covenant comes into our story. In a moment where all Moses can see is an end, God sees another new beginning. God knows that each and every time the people of God will come back to God. And that new beginning was just another opportunity to renew and reframe the covenant with them once more. It becomes an opportunity to remind the people who they were and whose they were. Each and every time the people came back to God was an opportunity to share the Spirit of God once more, to get what God is for us once more, to have them reclaim their relationship with God once more. That's all that God has ever wanted from us. To be in real, authentic relationship with us. And each and every time we go wandering God is actively working and waiting for us to come back again.

I think really what God was saying on the mountaintop that day wasn't meant to be depressing or devastating. I think God was simply beginning the process of changing our expectations about our relationship with God. I think God

was simply saying, “ Moses, all these stories are great. They remind the people what I have for them in the past but somehow, I’m going to have to find a way to keep reminding them of what I am doing for them new. Our relationship, our covenant is not just about remembering. It is also about experiencing, experiencing God’s grace, experiencing God’s love, experiencing God’s Kingdom, experiencing God made real for us.

God knew that at the very heart of this covenant that God was entering into with the people of God was an invitation to be in relationship with God, claimed and named as God’s own. That is what matters. That is what binds us together. That is what keeps us coming back time and time again. We know that each and every time, God will be made real for us. Each and every time, we will experience the blessings of God. Each and every time, hopefully, we will take God more seriously, take each other more seriously, take our covenant with God more seriously.

Each time we as the people of God come back to God becomes an opportunity for us to once again experience the life, the spirit, the love and grace of God once more in our lives and to become aware that God’s presence, God’s grace, God’s love is everywhere, not just the times we need them most.

God understands something that we tend to forget along the way. God understands that grace and gratitude are not separate. They go hand in hand

together. We can't have one without the other. "Grace evokes gratitude. Gratitude follows grace."

It is the natural cycle of the Kingdom of God and as we gather around the table, all tables, surrounded by family and friends, surround by people we don't even know, that table time should be a time for us to stop, reflect, and tune into this grace/gratitude cycle once more. Gathering around the table as the people of God becomes just one more opportunity in a long list of opportunities and experiences for us to renew our covenant with God.

So this week as we gather around our table, and every week, when we gather around the table, we are remembering and experiencing our God. We are renewing our covenant with God simply because We are acknowledging that we want to be in relationship with God. and not just any relationship, a relationship that we take seriously, where we celebrate that God is our center, a relationship where we understand that we are all connected as the people of God.

This week, and every week, at our Table and our tables, our new beginnings become an opportunity for us to reclaim our covenant with God in hopes that this time, as we experience the goodness of God, we won't just get stuffed and fill up on food. We will also fill up and get stuffed with the grace and love of God and never forget from whom all our blessings flow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

