
Closer Than You Think

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 10, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Prayer.

Sometimes you have to step back to see.

The first time I saw a painting in the style of pointillism, a branch of impressionism, I immediately walked up to the painting. I was intrigued by all of the small dots and dabs of color that made up the painting and marveled at the patience of the artist who carefully placed each spot of color. Pointillism uses individual points of color closely aligned and intentionally placed, rather than strokes of blended color. This concept was novel in the 19th century, though it is common today as our ink-jet printers and computer screens display images by way of innumerable dots. Georges Seurat, who devised the method of pointillism, painted *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, in which a variety of people are relaxing in a park, while admiring the river before them. This particular painting is large -- nearly seven by ten feet.¹ As you can imagine, walking up close to a painting such as this gives a good view of dots, but not much more. Both because of the style and the size of the painting, it is only by stepping back that a viewer can appreciate the painting as a whole. The tranquil scene in the park is only visible from a distance.

I wonder if we need a little distance to hear today's text from Deuteronomy. We have distance from the text given that it was written many centuries ago, and yet a passage like this seems to draw us in in ways that may not be helpful. Here, at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the third of four major speeches by Moses is presented. The Israelites have come through the desert, they are on the verge of the Promised Land, and Moses is near the end of his life. He is said to be 120 years old. (Deut 31:2) If you are ever feeling your age more than you wish, let Moses remind you you are a youngster! As Moses prepared the weary people to go forward, he paints a picture of great prosperity. "The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil." (Deut 30:9) What a promise! It is so intriguing we want to zoom in right on that verse and claim it for our own. Whether we are economically challenged or not, there is a natural desire to hear that promise for ourselves, individually.

I am no fan of the prosperity gospel. Those who hold to the prosperity gospel claim there is a direct connection between faithfulness to God and material prosperity. It doesn't take much living to see that such an equation does not always add up. And it doesn't take much study of Jesus to see that our Lord encourages us to be downwardly mobile rather than upwardly mobile. Something about losing your life in order to find it.

While the lure of material abundance draws us in, I think we need to step back from the picture the Deuteronomist is painting.

This text is written as Moses speaking to the people of God. To the people. Perhaps we need to back up from the individual level to consider the group as a whole. How does our understanding change if we think of these words directed to a group of people together striving to understand and follow the commandments of God? This speech is directed to those who fled Egypt, wandered the wilderness, and were about to enter the Promised Land. It was one

¹ Art Institute of Chicago notes: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/27992>

people, but not the same individuals. The group endured; particular people did not. God's promise to the Israelites were never that you, Elmer and Esmerelda would have a booming agricultural business. Nor has the Lord claimed that Suzy and Joe, would have 2.2 babies, who would, of course, be above average in every way. Besides, Suzy and Joe may be happy with two babies or three, not some random number in between. God has not even promised that the environment will always be calm enough and conducive enough for individual flourishing. This text seems to be a promise to the people of God – a promise that the community of faith will indeed survive and prosper in the new land that God will give.

There is great comfort in knowing that we are part of a much larger whole. If we read this text as directed to individuals, then we have the frightening pressure to be obedient enough to gain God's blessings and the disturbing corollary that claims that any suffering is the result of our failings. When we back up, to see this passage from a wider perspective, we can often trust the group when we may not be able to trust ourselves. For instance, if one person is in a season of doubt, we can be confident that simultaneously there are others within the body who are blessed with the certainty of faith. We each have seasons of ups and downs, yet together, as a body, our praise of God is continual. I see this beautifully illustrated whenever we sing hymns at a funeral or memorial service. Those who are recently grieved may be too choked up to sing, so the friends and family who are present sing on their behalf. And then down the line, the roles may be reversed. The people of God can continue to sing the Lord's song, even if for a moment or a season some individuals cannot find their voice. The people of God will continue on and prosper.

Except when they don't.

This third speech of Moses, known as the covenant at Moab, may well have been written much later than the time of Moses. Many think it was written during the exile. So this passage of encouragement is not only a story of what Moses said to weary wanderers, but it was also designed to lift the spirit of those who had been carted off into exile. There had been times of prosperity and stability for Israel, but there was also conflict and invading neighbors. There was destruction and mayhem, punishment for the nation's faithlessness.

Here, we need to take another step back to see an even bigger picture. At this point in the book of Deuteronomy, the author acknowledges the suffering of the nation, the display of the Lord's anger for the abandonment of the divine covenant (Deut 29:24-25) and in the midst of this pain, the author points backwards and forwards. The picture is expanding chronologically as we take a longer view

The covenant at Moab points to the incredible faithfulness of God throughout the generations. By looking back, the people can see God at work throughout their history and know that God has been present, gracious, and good. The author also looks forward to a time of the fulfillment of God's promises, reminding the people that just as God has been faithful in the past, God will be faithful and good in the future.² Even while the people are limited in their ability to be obedient to God, history shows that God has been faithful and true and there is every reason to believe God's promises will be fulfilled in the future. By looking back and looking forward, we find hope for today.

God's people in exile needed hope. The Deuteronomist nurtured their hope by reminding them of the bigger picture, a long history, and a longer future guided by God's gracious hand.

One of the news stories we have heard this week is of Juno, the space probe that entered Jupiter's orbit on July 4. This is the result of a five year, two billion mile, solar-powered trip. The probe is scheduled to spend two years orbiting the planet, with the goal of learning more about large, gaseous planet.³ Fun fact: there are three Lego figures which have

² *Deuteronomy*, Deanna Thompson, p. 205

³ NASA, "Juno Facts" http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/press_kits/juno/facts/

been along for the ride. One represents Galileo, who first discovered Jupiter's moons, another, the god Jupiter, and the third is the goddess, Juno, wife of Jupiter.⁴ These three figures, supported by dedicated NASA scientists have had a tremendous ride -- five years, two billion miles. There is nothing quite like space science to remind us of our place in the universe, to help us recall the vastness of time and space, and to in general undermine our notions of self-importance. And God, as creator of the universe, is even grander.

And yet, the reason NASA sent Juno to Jupiter is to get close. In October the probe is to draw even nearer to the planet than it is now. The goal is for close-up pictures, zooming in to look at all the parts that make up the whole.

God, the God of the universe, has drawn very close to the Israelites. Hear the description of God's commandments:

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. (Deut 30:11-14)

God is calling the people to obedience and faithfulness, yet not doing so from some distance, detached place. God's word is very near and not too hard. It is not rocket science. When you see someone wounded or broken, stop long enough to help. The good Samaritan, paused to give aid and promised to return. We are to choose life, protect life, not take it or destroy it. We are to treat others as those who are made in the image of God. Love God, love neighbor.

And yet there is more. The word of God is not just close, it is in our hearts, making it possible for us to observe and obey. Earlier in Deuteronomy, we hear Moses says to the Israelites, "Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer." (Deut 10:16) indicating the the people themselves would have to prepare their own hearts for obedience. It was up to them. Now, at the end of the book, the message changes, as we read "the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live." (Deut 30:6) Now it is God, preparing hearts for obedience. By grace, God's word is close and our hearts are prepared. What God commands is not too hard for us. It seems as if the prayer offered in Colossians was heard even before it was spoken -- that we "may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that [we] may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to [God] (Col 1:9-10).

And yet there is still more. Today, we gather around the Lord's Table. In this sacrament, the God of all chooses to meet us here. As we take in these elements, which we receive as the body and blood of Jesus, God is so near that these elements literally become part of our bodies. We abide in Christ as he abides in us.

Out of mercy and love, God makes a way for us to be faithful, both individually and as a body of believers. God does ask something of us. The speech of Moses goes on beyond the lectionary text we read to the dramatic moment in which Moses declares "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." (Deut 30:19) Human choice and response is essential. Today, let us hear that God has prepared the way and makes our affirmation possible.

Weary pilgrims near the end of their journey needed encouragement to move forward yet again.

⁴ National Geographic, "Ten Things You Need To Know About the Juno Mission"

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/07/nasa-juno-jupiter-fun-facts-planets-moons-lego-galileo-space/>

Exiles living in a foreign land needed hope that the chapter of suffering would end and a new day would dawn.

Perhaps we are weary. Perhaps we want an difficult chapter to close. Perhaps we wonder how we, as individuals and as a people, how we can possibly live lives worthy of the Lord. Perhaps, in a conflict-ridden world, we wonder how we can possibly bear witness to faith, hope, and love.

Hear the ancient text: It is not too hard for you or too far away.

You can do it. God is closer than you think.

Thanks be to God. Amen.