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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist 29 October 2023

Fr. Allen Doerksen

Sermon starts 29:30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqlj_IknnmU>

Denise and I are anticipating the birth of our first grandchild – apparently, this is going to happen tomorrow... so prayers appreciated. But we’re really, of course, thrilled, and I wonder in particular what it will be like to hold that precious one in my arms. I’m sure I’m going to feel deep emotion. I’m sure I’m going to feel a greater urgency than I’ve ever felt to do my part, in that child’s life and in the wider community. And I will wonder, what will the future look like for this little one? Of course, in the back of my mind will be the challenges of our world. I will reassure myself that every generation, at every time, has faced a world in which monumental challenges loom. I will reassure myself that though many institutions and corporations seem to be making decisions that maximize profits and influence today, with, it would seem, very little concern for how future generations will fare as a consequence. There is something – I think it’s the image of God – in all of us, that will help us, that will help enough of us, I believe - I know that’s faith speaking - to engage with our challenges. That the future will be manageable; will slowly, as Martin Luther King said many years ago now, slowly bend towards justice, to loving justice.

And I will, I’m sure, as I hold that little one in my arms, turn that faith, turn that hope, into prayer.

By way of analogy, yesterday we held the future of our beloved community here at St Philip in our collective arms as we wondered what is to come for St Philip [at the World Café congregational meeting]. Thank you to those of you who participated in that. Thank you to those of you who worked hard at that, making that happen. It was a wonderful event, wonderful connections were made around the tables. And for those of you who were not able to come for whatever reason, we’re going to of course publish the results of our musings and creativity and imagining at some point, so you’ll get to be part of the next stage.

We attempted, as Moses did in our first reading, to look out over the land and see something of the dimensions of God’s promises to the church, [33:00] and what plans our wider community might consider, and what each of us might do.

I think it’s kind of serendipitous that this text was assigned for this Sunday, though there seems to be no logical reason why it was assigned – let me explain. It’s likely that the lectionary editors just got bored – you know, we’ve been in Genesis and Exodus for the past number of months, since the beginning of summer, and then all of a sudden, without any reasons given, we fast-forward to the end of the Five Books of Moses. We skip Leviticus entirely – I think you’re happy about that. We skip the Book of Numbers entirely – you’re probably happy about that as well, though one of my favourite professors wrote a wonderful book on congregational leadership from the Book of Numbers, so I’ve always been fascinated by that book. [34:00] And then we skip the entire Book of Deuteronomy, except for the very last chapter. It does seem very arbitrary to me, but happily so, I guess, in terms of what’s going on in our parish.

At first it might seem that Moses has failed. His whole career has been bent on herding cats – herding the ‘cats’ in this nation toward the mystical land of milk and honey. But now, it’s clear this is milk and honey Moses is never going to drink or eat. What has he done wrong, we might ask? Well actually nothing, really. The chapter, chapter 34, is a beautiful eulogy to Moses, to a job well done, to a life well lived, to a leadership that’s been offered in genuine service to his people. And what we learn is that the kind of clear-sighted vision that Moses had, towards which he led the often-grumbling Israelites, was never about him. It wasn’t about him looking good, never about his personal fulfilment. Moses would have stared at us uncomprehendingly if he heard some of our culture’s vocational advice: “follow your heart,” “follow your bliss.” He wouldn’t have understood it. Moses’ focus was always on what was best for the people he was leading, what was best for the nation as a whole, what would help the nation find its reason for being, [36:00] in the being of the living God – and therefore, in the living God’s purposes: that there would be enough for all, peace for all. This seems to have been the root political idea of the founding of this federation of tribes – very different from the kingdoms around them. Moses would not have understood our ongoing fascination with the Greco-Roman idea of heroes – the superhero genre of films being only one iteration of that. He would not have understood what our universities taught in their history departments for the last several centuries – up until only the last few decades: the Great Man theory of history. He would have thought that was not on. [37:00}

But far from failure, by not experiencing the completeness of entering the Promised Land, Moses helps us to understand something at the heart of what it means to live a flourishing life. We don’t have to arrive to be fulfilled. We don’t have to succeed in every way in order for our life to be meaningful. And that’s because we are never complete, in and of ourselves, but only as we are part of a community that is greater than ourselves, and older than ourselves, and younger, in terms of time. And of course this is what we mean by the communion of saints, something we’re going to celebrate this next week. The world will celebrate the vapours of it, Halloween, but we have this idea that, through time, [38:00] we are the body politic in God, the communion of saints. Now, right now this idea is not popular in our culture, but I believe that as individualism continues to run its course, and to run amok, this worship of narcissism that we see writ large in our cousins to the south, perhaps there will be churches that understand what it is to be leaven in the wider culture, and have this vision of the communion of the whole as more important than any one life or leader.

Well, here’s something else that is truly important to know. This chapter, indeed the whole book of Deuteronomy, Is couched as a sermon given by Moses [39:00] right at the end, as he stands looking out over the Promised Land. Well, we know that it’s not a kind of historical piece, that it was written – there’s lots of clues in the text itself, the type of Hebrew that is used, etc etc – written some time when Israel was in its first exile, some time in the 7th century before the Common Era. In other words, it’s an imaginative reconstruction of what it will mean to live as a nation going forward, as they emerge from exile. And it’s a wake-up call for that nation in a radically changed situation. This historical critical understanding, far from making the Bible less holy, less the Word of God, allows that generation and of course us to make the Bible and its figures our own, to help us make it and its themes more relevant. And this, of course, we can apply to our music – I was thinking about some of the songs we were singing today, the message of missions and of taking God’s light to the nations used to mean one thing, we now need to appropriate that language in a very different way, knowing what we know about colonialism. It’s what allows us to say in our Collect, “our Promised Land”, not just the Promised Land way back when. And so we see here in this text, and in what’s happening in the Bible as a whole, that the people of God are constantly having to rework and reimagine God’s presence with them, in extremely challenging and sometimes even earth-shattering circumstances. And this in turn can then give us hope: if our forebears dared to glimpse the “Promised Land “ after national disaster, and with the clear-eyed vision that no one leader, that no one set of past experiences or achievements, could kind of kind of charismatically make it all better, more happen for them, again – then so can we. We note that the successor for Moses, the greatest leader they ever had, is one named Joshua, the son of Nun – in Hebrew of course, Yeshua, in Greek Iesous, in English: Jesus. And we are baptized, as Jesus himself points out [42:00] in his question to the Pharisees, into this greater Joshua, the one who is not just the son of David but the lord of David, the one filled with the spirit of wisdom. There is no one singular Joshua to lead us into the Promised Land, no one priest, no set of wardens, no council, that can do it *for* us. We are now in this new Joshua: we are the Body of Christ, the body of Jesus, who with the Spirit’s wisdom opens a path.

I was lucky to attend Regent College when Eugene Peterson was teaching there; his book *Under the Unpredictable Plant* was for me a road map to priestly ministry. In one of his other books he says that churches, and particularly the popularity of the church, and therefore the size of churches in terms of the amount of people attending on Sunday mornings, is far more a matter of what’s going on in the culture, the prevailing world views and sociology, than anything any one person or any one leader can do, or doesn’t do. And that was a great relief to me. I had actually seen this to be the case earlier in my ministry, when I was not an Anglican priest but a nondenominational pastor. Denise and I opened the doors of a school gymnasium that we were renting out, and within a few months we had 200 people attending. And we were in our mid-20s, so it had nothing to do with gift or charisma. That church, and what it was doing, and its ‘brand’ if you will, was what was ‘hot’ at the time. It’s kind of the opposite since I’ve joined the Anglican church! Even though I think our message is a heck of a lot better and more wholesome – we’re not the ‘hot’ thing, sorry to say! But you know, it’s been a relief to me, and it should assuage the feelings of failure or concern that we might have as we imagine St Philip, or the church in general, after a world-changing event like Covid-19.

What I drew from Eugene’s stellar example as a pastor, and of course more so from people like Moses, was that to be clear-sighted about the future is not to obsess about success, but to be deeply concerned with soul, with love of God and love of neighbour. If we allow this to be the yeast that leavens our community, it will help others around us as well. Then our parish will be fulfilling, if always necessarily incomplete.

There’s a beautiful midrash on that line from our reading that says Moses died by the command of the Lord, by the word of the Lord – literally in Hebrew one can translate this “by the mouth of the Lord”. And so the sages imagined in their midrash that Moses died by a kiss. The death of a leader, here imagined by Israel as a monumental change, is not viewed tragically, but as something held by God, in the intimate care of God.

The paradox we often quote is that “change is the only constant”. As Christians who believe that God is making all things new, we take to heart that even change like death, even the change of diminishment, can be kissed by God. This is our faith: loving God and loving our neighbour is always the vision of the promised land we need. Daring to hold each other, whether it’s newborns in our arms or the elderly with the care of presence, and everyone in between, our youth, people who are coming looking for meaning and purpose. As many of you already do, by the way. It’s been one of the great joys of my time, the seven months I’ve been with you, to see the type of care that you give to one another and to people in the wider community. Well, that kind of love, if I can say it this way, is not just love, but the hope we need to see clearly at this time and in this place. May it be so here at St Philip.

Amen.