Promised Land Planning: Set a Goal

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Matthew 22:34-46
Preached by Richard Bolin at Trinity United Methodist Church
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"And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face..."

None of the other great prophets of Israel were quite like Moses, who went without an army to confront Egypt's Pharaoh, who freed a nation of slaves with only God's staff for his weapon, who led a multitude through the wilderness for 40 years, keeping them together, encouraging them, holding them accountable, always lifting before them the vision of a land of milk and honey, a land promised by God which would be at the journey's end.

Moses did not enter the Promised Land. Scripture tells us that he viewed it from a mountaintop on his dying day. Until that day he did not know exactly what it looked like, or exactly where it was. And when God told Moses that he would not enter the land, he did not speak with anger and disappointment. His response was a prayer of blessing for the people he loved. He had led the people to the threshold.

What was it that Martin Luther King, Jr. said? “I’ve been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you.” Like Moses and like Martin, the Promised Land is there for us to glimpse, a goal to reach for. Though we may not get there ourselves, it is a vision that guides our journey. We are called to be a part of a journeying Church, a people on the way.

“Promised Land Planning” is the theme of our worship series for these last five weeks of the liturgical year. Looking through the scripture lessons from the lectionary we find kernels of wisdom sounding like good financial planning advice: set a goal, imitate proven role models, plan ahead, invest and spend your inheritance … oh, wait! That last one didn’t sound right. There is indeed a difference between financial planning and Promised Land planning. The grace is in the details, and each bit of biblical advice sets us on a course that is indeed enriching, but isn’t just about each of us building our personal nest egg.

Promised Land Planning principle number one is “set a goal.” The Promised Land is the goal. So what is this goal that we call the Promised Land?

This culture of ours is always promising us things. Happiness, we are told, is there to be grasped. It is in the form of this product, or that insurance policy, or
this dream house. If you get it you have arrived in the Promised Land, which at
times is synonymous with the American Dream.

After serving four years in an associate position following seminary, I was
appointed as the pastor of University Church in Isla Vista, near the University of
California at Santa Barbara. We think of Santa Barbara as an affluent place, but
the United Methodist Church in Isla Vista was not affluent. While I was there we
doubled our budget expenditures. They went from $20,000 to $40,000. That
was the WHOLE annual budget – pastor’s salary, office supplies, insurance,
building maintenance. We budgeted $1,000 for building maintenance, including
the $20 per week we paid our custodian. And with a lot of volunteerism and
creativity we managed to take pretty good care of the place, but it was always a
struggle.

Sometimes I would go to meetings at other churches; big churches with
nicely furnished fellowship halls and new video equipment. I coveted my
neighbor’s property. I would see a professional painting crew on scaffolding
giving everything a fresh new look. As I looked at all those nice facilities I
couldn't help but think to myself, "maybe this is the promised land."

And lo and behold, there came a time when I was the pastor at such a
church: facilities to die for and an endowment to keep it all in top condition. And it
was not the Promised Land. … The Promised Land means something more than
nice buildings. The Promised Land means something more than a plum
appointment, acceptance to a prestigious university, a paid-off mortgage, or a
picture perfect family with all the visible trappings of success. To envision the
promised land as my personal success while the rest of the world falls apart
around us is to liken it to a first class ticket on the Titanic!

The Promised Land is not the Promised Land yet. That is, the land across
the Jordan that Moses saw from afar is today a land in turmoil. We pray for peace
in the Middle East. We talk about a 2-state solution as a way of getting there. But
the true Promised Land is not the two-state solution. The true Promised Land is
not democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan and successful diplomacy which ends
nuclear weapons development in Iran and North Korea. The true Promised Land
has been envisioned for us by Isaiah and Micah, the universal vision of all the
nations of the world gathered at God’s mountain having beaten their swords in to
plows and their spears into pruning hooks.

The biblical concept of the Promised Land is very relevant to our lives and
our world. It is not a pie-in-the-sky-place-for-a-time-after-you-die Promised Land.
It is the place that defines the corporate direction of all of God’s children, the
vision that draws us into the future, the fulfillment of what God intends for
Creation.

Keep your eyes on the prize. The Promised Land is not my Promised Land
or any particular group’s Promised Land, but the place where God will lead all
God’s children, and which won’t be The Promised Land until we all get there.
The place we live in now is a perilous world. The news stories of the day force that reality upon our consciousness. But the scriptures give us that long-view perspective that the world has always been dangerous, violent, greedy – and it is not more so now. Wherever we are, it is not the Promised Land. We know that. Our calling is to journey onward to the goal. Stay focused on the main thing – which was stated succinctly in today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew: Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Never since has there arisen a prophet like Moses, Deuteronomy proclaims. Jesus does not argue with that assessment of Moses. Jesus comes out of the Moses tradition and honors the Moses tradition. When he is asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus says what Moses said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then, in the book of Leviticus, where Moses continues to spell out the implications of the 10 commandments, it is written, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus also cites this ancient formulation in answer to the question about the greatest commandments. He says that when you put these two ancient teachings together, you have summarized everything Moses taught, and all the prophets who came after him.

Jesus does not say anything new when asked what is the most important commandment. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. This is not a new teaching. It is an all-encompassing teaching. Then Jesus leads us to the Promised Land by being the love that he teaches.

In India the story is told about a very old man who used to meditate early every morning under a large tree on the bank of the Ganges River. One morning, having finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current of the river. As the scorpion was pulled close to the tree, it got caught in the long tree roots that branched out far into the river. The scorpion struggled frantically to free itself but got more and more entangled in the complex network of the tree roots.

When the old man saw this, he immediately stretched himself onto the extended roots and reached out to rescue the drowning scorpion. But as soon as he touched it, the animal jerked and stung him wildly. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand, but then, after having regained his balance, he once again stretched himself out along the roots to save the agonized scorpion. But every time the old man came within reach, the scorpion stung him so badly with his poisonous tail that his hands became swollen and bloody and his face distorted by pain.

At that moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion and said: “Hey, stupid old man. What's wrong with
you? Only a fool risks his life for the sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don't you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?"

Slowly the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger's eyes, he said: “Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?”

It is God's nature to save. Jesus comes to give us God's saving love. Jesus comes to act out what that old time religion has taught since the days of Moses. Jesus talks about righteousness, about love, about grace ... all of these teachings can be found in one way or another in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is a master teacher, a creative Rabbi. He shares the essential teachings of that old time religion in a way that makes it seem simple, compelling, and new.

But we are not Christians because of what Jesus teaches. To follow the teachings of Moses and Jesus would make us all better people, to be sure. We are Christians, however, not because of what Jesus says about God's love, but because of what Jesus does about God's love. Jesus is the love of God. Jesus is the finger with which God reaches out to touch creation, and through which God feels our pain. Jesus' teachings are a great gift to us, but the greater gift is the story of Jesus' life, which is the story that assures us that we are loved without hesitation, and which enables us to love without hesitation.

The Promised Land is Grace Land. The Promised Land is that place where we respond to the gift of salvation. Our response to the gift of salvation is to love as God loves us. And what is that love like? That love is like Jesus on the cross forgiving his executioners. That love is like a mother's embrace of a wayward child. That love is like the fierce determination to redeem souls bent on self-destruction. That is how we have been loved. That is how we are loved. To ignore such a love is to wander in the wilderness. To be touched by such a love, to be transformed by such a love, is to cross the River Jordan.

We are looking for the Promised Land. When we respond to God's love, the Promised Land will have found us. Amen.