

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 16, 2020**  
**Southampton, MA**

**Scripture:** Deut. 30:15-20  
1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Deuteronomy is the final book in the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah. It is the end of Israel's journey. We can think of that journey in two ways. One is the obvious, Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea and then wandering forty years through the wilderness. The second is a longer journey beginning with Abram leaving Haran. This one is the story of Israel's origins. It is the story of a people who put their faith and trust in God, who though sometimes straying, stayed true to this moment.

Israel stood poised to cross the Jordan River and enter the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. They would establish a nation in a land already occupied by Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. They were people who worshipped other gods. Moses would not cross the river with Israel. He warned Israel to stay true to God, Yahweh, and not to be drawn to other gods whom they might find attractive.

Crossing the Jordan was not just geographically going from one place to another. Though it marked the end of a forty-year wandering through the Wilderness, a journey through Sinai and then into Midian, Edom, and Moab, which are present-day Jordan, its significance was two-fold. First, it marked the end of their wandering. Forty years without a home. Forty years during which time the people occasionally yearned for the certainty of their past in Egypt as noted, "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic," (Numbers 11:5) despite suffering in bondage. Second, it marked the end of their story of origin and the beginning of them as a nation. Moses' warning not only advised

them that remaining faithful to Yahweh would make them a blessed nation, but that Yahweh would continue to be their God and, thus, they must maintain their faithfulness to God forever.

Despite Moses' warning, Israel had mixed success staying true to his admonishment. Moses died atop Mount Nebo where he could look across the Jordan to the land he would not enter. Joshua would lead them.

As a nation, God would rule Israel. It would have no kings, unlike the nations around it. And yet, despite Joshua's warning to Israel at the end of his life to stay true to God, they succumbed to Canaanite gods. Yahweh raised up for them warlords to battle against the people who sought to destroy them. Nevertheless, Israel insistently yearned for a king. Thus, God acceded to their desires and said to the prophet Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for it is not you they have cast aside, but Me they have cast aside from reigning over them." (1 Sam. 8:7)

As this short, very abbreviated account of Israel's relationship with God makes clear, following God is very hard. We can consider God's acceding to Israel's desire for king as God being a realist. It's just hard to stay absolutely true to God.

Paul's letter addressed a divided church. He wrote earlier in this epistle, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." (1 Cor. 1:11-12) Paul wanted the church to follow Jesus, not him or Apollos, who was a young charismatic figure, "an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures." (Acts 18:24b) More accurately, Paul urged the church to follow God's ways, which through the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus is the foolish way of the cross.

Following God is harder than we can imagine. Sure, we follow God by doing the basics: being kind and compassionate, being generous and grateful, living a life of integrity and honesty. We concur with leaning into the common good. We find it a little harder, though, to trust in love in the face of fear or accepting that humility is the source of true power. We may struggle with the gospel's understanding of leadership as servanthood and the belief that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. But we may have a really hard time, perhaps an impossibility, to let go of those things and aspects we cherish.

We faced some hard realities in last week's community discernment. Change is almost a non-negotiable if we want long term sustainability. There are two types of changes, technical and adaptive. Technical changes are changes we make when we know the solution. We talked about our excessive building costs and taking some action to address them. Two ideas came to mind. One was to close the sanctuary for worship in the winter to save on heat. Another was to remove all the pews to give the sanctuary more flexibility in order to rent it for income. Those were technical changes.

Adaptive change is a solution requiring a change of heart. An example, which was not offered, would be to leave this building to find space more suited to our current size and resources. I'm guessing that is for all intents and purposes a non-starter.

This is not a god in the sense of the gods Moses warned Israel about. It is not god in the sense that Paul urged the Corinthian church to follow Jesus not him or Apollos. This is not some anthropomorphic god, but a god, nevertheless, in that we hold it as an idol. Furthermore, though the building is a physical object, we can also have idols that are not physical at all, such as beliefs that ground us. They could be our self-image or truths by which we organize ourselves in the world.

Following God is very hard because, though we believe in the existence of God, we sometimes question God's ways, especially when we face hard challenges. Let's be honest, there is a gap between us and God. God is intangible at times. The gap is not just physical, but intellectual as well because our minds are too small to comprehend God's fullness. We need some sort of connection to close that gap, especially when we have to weather our personal storms and crisis.

Turning to, what I call, little g gods, is more natural than we think. We use those gods as a stand in for Yahweh, as in the big g, God. This gap prompted Israel to seek a king because their faith alone couldn't close the gap between them and God. Jesus' physical absence kept the divisions within the Corinthian church wanting to follow Paul or Apollos because those men were tangible. How were they to follow someone who was intangible? When Paul wrote this letter there was no Bible to tell of Jesus or to offer any of the theological insights we have now. Promised blessings are sometimes thin in times of anxiety. Give up the certainty of what we have for a promise of something no one can guarantee? That's why we sometimes have such a difficult time letting go of objects and things or our own deeply embedded beliefs.

We seek certainty in God, and for the most part, we have reasonable assurances that when we live our lives according to ways of the cross, we will be blessed, which is what scripture tells us over and over again. We become less certain when ways of the cross fly in the face of our reality, such as trusting that true peace comes not from weapons of destruction and violence, but from breaking bread and sharing the cup. We become even less certain when we have to make a change that requires a change of our hearts, such as leaving our building because it will suit our ministry better and be less costly to maintain or letting go of our own deeply held belief.

Though we can't completely surrender ourselves to our faith, God does not condemn us. Remember, God acceded to Israel's wishes for a king. However, when we can't completely surrender to our faith, we can't reap the full blessings which God pours out upon us. We're not faithless, and we're not inadequate. We just can't bring ourselves to live with the uncertainty that comes with entering the unknown. We will live with the consequences of our actions or inactions. We may be content with the outcome, or we may suffer terribly. Regardless, God will always be with us; that's assured.

Just as Moses warned Israel not to be attracted to little g gods, just as Paul warned the Corinthian church to follow Jesus, not him or Apollos, those warnings apply to us as well today. Little g gods are all around us. They could be charismatic leaders who assuage our insecurities. They could be ideas or perceptions that affirm how we already define ourselves, even though they hold us back from fully flourishing to our highest potential. They could be physical objects that shackle us without us realizing they are a source of our anxieties.

Following God is to trust God. Our faith is to trust and follow the teachings of Jesus. Despite making it sound so easy, this is hard. But let's not give up. As we find courage to push further into the uncertainty and unknown, our faith will grow as will the blessings which await us.