

**Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church**

2740 Hunters Green
San Antonio, Texas 78231
(210) 492-3902

<http://www.oakmeadowumc.org/>

Pastor Larry Scharmann

Laity Notes

by
Chuck Hall

August 1, 2004 – Number 21

THE PROMISED LAND

At the age of 120, and in the eleventh month of the fortieth year in Sinai, Moses brought together the children of Israel before him on the plains of Moab. The Promised Land lay immediately across the Jordan River, and the city of Jericho was nearly in sight. Moses gathered his people to give them a farewell address, for he would not be crossing the Jordan with them; he would not enter the Promised Land. Forty years earlier, before a burning bush in the Midian desert, God called Moses and told him the He had “come down...to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” [Ex. 3:8] Moses would be leading his people to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but he would remain to die on the east bank of the Jordan River, a crossing short of the Promised Land. Aside from milk and honey, the Promised Land also contained Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, six local tribes not terribly excited about giving up their land to the Israelites. This was not a gift in the usual sense; it would require considerable effort to possess. “See,” God told the Israelites, “I have set the land before you. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them.” [Dt. 1:8] To “take possession” meant to take it away from its current owners. The Promised Land would be a land of “milk and honey,” but it would not be a

Utopia. A man could get killed in the fight to possess God’s gift.

If the gift of the Promised Land was unusual in the sense that possession would require stiff fighting, it was also delayed considerably in coming. Depending upon how one counts, nearly six centuries had lapsed since God had called Abraham to “Go forth from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” [Gen.12:1] Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been sojourners in the Promised Land, but for them it had remained the land of the promise. The only piece of land the patriarchs owned was a small field near Hebron with the cave of Machpelah that Abraham had purchased as a burial plot when Sarah died. Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Leah would later be buried in the same plot. Of the patriarchs and their wives, only Rachael, the wife Jacob loved, was buried elsewhere, and that because she died giving birth to Benjamin while returning from Haran to the Promised Land. The patriarchs fared with family somewhat more than in land. When Jacob settled in Egypt with his son Joseph, the clan included but seventy souls. As with the promise of land, the fruition of God’s promise to make Abraham a great nation lay in the future.

By the time of Moses’ birth, seventy had grown into a nation of sorts. At least they were sufficiently numerous to send fear into the Pharaoh’s heart, and his response to fear led to the cries heard by God and to the call of Moses to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt. It was this much larger group of the sons of Israel that Moses led out of Egypt, to Mount Sinai and on a forty-year wander in the Sinai desert before arriving on the edge of the Promised Land.

What was then this land of promise? In the first place it was an agricultural land, “a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” [Dt. 11:11-12] Once the Israelites had fought their way into the Promised Land, God would grant them peace so that they could live in safety and be free to tend their fields. It was a place where they could prosper and eat their fill. They could build beautiful houses and their flocks would multiply, as would their silver and gold. There was in the Promised Land great promise of prosperity.

But the Promised Land was not a Utopia. God would deliver the land, but the land would be won by fighting. The effort would bind faith and works in a fashion that blurred any clear distinction between the two. Fields would not plow and plant themselves. Prosperity was possible but far from guaranteed. In the normal course of living, a man could become poor or go blind. A man's daughter could be raped and judges could be tempted by bribes. A child's father might die leaving behind an orphan and a widow. A foreigner might find himself in the Promised Land and settle down to live, but he would remain a sojourner without access to land ownership or clan protection. These people on the margin, the fatherless, the widow and the sojourner, were offered special protection, and might glean the wheat field or find grapes purposely left behind so that they could feed themselves with dignity. And always there was the threat of apostasy, of turning to other gods. This threat was constant and the Israelites were to guard against its approach from any front.

In the second place, Moses laid out a framework for government in the Promised Land which included provisions for justice, kingship, the clergy and prophets. Distinctions were drawn between local legal cases and those more complicated ones which needed to be taken to "the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it." [Dt. 16:5] Two witnesses were required for conviction; the word of a single witness would not do.

A king was to be held in check by prohibitions on the number of wives, horses, gold and silver that he might collect. He was not to acquire "too many," or "too much" of any of these categories. He was to write a copy of the Torah legislation to be approved by Levitical priests which he was to read all the days of his life. The purpose was that he might learn to fear God.

Priests and Levites were denied any portion of the land, and compensated instead by the tithe. They would oversee the sacrificial system to be established in "the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it." Under Solomon, that place would be the Temple in Jerusalem.

The judicial system, the king and the priesthood would in turn be held in check by the prophet. God would raise up a prophet like Moses and put words in his mouth. Yet the Israelites were to

listen critically because there would be some who would claim falsely a prophetic call. Not only were false prophets to be ignored, if they steered people to other gods they were to be killed.

Finally, there was the matter of contingency. Toward the end of his farewell speech, Moses told the Israelites that "this day you have become the people of the LORD your God." [Dt. 27:9] This bold statement was followed by a series of blessings and curses; blessings for those who chose to obey the Torah and curses for those who chose otherwise, and the curses seemed far more chilling than the blessings were warming. In short, the declaration was contingent upon behavior and matters of the heart. The word heart appears fifty-three times in the book of Deuteronomy. An Israelite might turn legalistic, but when he did so he was far off course. How hard were these commandments to understand and to obey? According to Moses, the Torah is "not too hard for you, neither is it far off." One did not have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea to find it. It was much closer to home: "But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." [Dt. 30:14]

Yet the inclination to evil persisted, and in the verses immediately preceding the assurance that "you can do it," provision is made for return, a return to the LORD your God "with all your heart and with all your soul." [Dt. 30:2] When John the Baptist stood in the Jordan River calling on people to "repent," the Aramaic word he used meant "turn," or "return," in the same sense that Moses spoke in Deuteronomy. The verses separating "you can do it" from "when you return" are remarkably few.

"Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them." [Dt. 30:19-20] The choice was clear, as was the provision for a return. The Promised Land was a land flowing with milk and honey, but it was no Utopia. The path was not straight.

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

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