

“The Word Is Very Near”

Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah, is called Moses valedictory speech to the people of Israel. After forty years journeying through the wilderness (think rocky desert not a forest or other wooded area, but a place dry, hot, barren, hilly, hard to navigate and low on water or any kind of food). They have reached Mount Nebo and are looking over into the Promised Land. Only three men are left from the initial group that walked away from Egypt, crossed the Reed Sea, camped at Mount Sinai, and built the Tabernacle which was YHWH’s first home on earth. Those three are Moses, Joshua and Caleb.

These three were the only ones remaining because they were the only ones true to YHWH. Joshua and Caleb were part of a group of twelve spies who scouted enemy territory. Ten of them said it was impossible to defeat the enemy. Joshua and Caleb believed that the Hebrew people could conquer their enemies with God’s help. Thus, God grants that they will be the only ones of the original group to enter the Promised Land. All others will die before then. The long sojourn in the desert is to allow a generation to pass before entering the Promised Land of Canaan.

Moses is prohibited by God from entering the Promised Land for his disobedience of God. Since he cannot enter he gives this long speech to the tribe reminding them of all of God’s commandments, promises, and goodness. The Book of Deuteronomy is packed with remembrances and reminders of the time before the Exodus, how God brought the people out of bondage in Egypt, how God took care of the people on the Exodus, and the importance of keeping God’s law as they cross into the new land that God has given them.

Today’s passage is near the end of their time at Mt. Nebo. As Moses’ death draws near his exhortations get more pronounced and urgent. And we come to the passage we heard read today. Where Moses insists, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away." Because we are coming in near the end of this speech that lasts thirty plus chapters we may not have in our minds exactly what the commandment is that he is commanding the people to follow. He is reminding the people that their wellbeing depends on Moses’ commandment that they keep their covenantal fidelity.

That means that the people need to keep all of their promises to God just as God is keeping all of his promises to them. Those promises are most obviously the Decalogue or Ten Commandments that Moses reiterates earlier in the Book of Deuteronomy.¹ After that he revisits the Decalogue, he goes on to give other commandments that in many cases elucidate the ten and how they apply to the lives and actions of the people. For example, the blessings of

¹ Deuteronomy 5:6-21

obedience, a warning not to forget God in prosperity, warnings against idolatry, and the need to destroy pagan shrines, laws about foods, laws about tithing, festivals and so much more. ² There are many commandments within the larger commandment to keep true to the covenant with God.

When he arrives at the words we heard today he is summing up. He knows that he has given lots of information and detail to the people. He expects that they are wondering how they will remember all of this and how they can keep such detailed responsibilities. Thus he reminds them that what he has told them is not some far off notion, it is not secret knowledge, nor is it something that only mystics, priests, and angels have access to. Specifically, he says that, "It is not in heaven... Neither is it beyond the sea."

Rather he points out that, "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." These words give me a shiver of joy down my spine each time I hear them. The promise that Moses is making to us is that the word of God, the teaching of God, is not so far away and so hard to attain. It is within us already. It has been put in our hearts from before birth. We have it available and all we have to do is avail ourselves of it. If we open our mouths not with our own needs and wants but with the will of God within our words, then God will be present.

The word of God is very near to us. We are invited to take hold of it, chew on it in pondering like a cow chews her cud. We are to, as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote in the 15th century, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Word of God. We are to become so filled with the scriptures that we find them on the tips of our tongues and at our fingertips.

Despite what the Israelites thought of the Samaritans the word was very near them, too. It is obvious in the parable Jesus tells today that it was not the priest, or scribe who embodied the word of God, it was the feared outsider. It was the Samaritan, the enemy, who saved the man's life. It was he who knew that his neighbor was anyone in need. It was the Samaritan not the holy men who lived with the word very near to him.

Make the choice to live the word of God as spoken by Jesus, the patriarchs, the matriarchs, the saints, and holy sinners who strove throughout their lives the keep the word of God near. They did their best to live it every day no matter what the world, the gossips, and unholy sinners murmured against them. When we answer to God alone and following God's word as best we can God leads us on the right path for his namesake in this life and into the life to come.

² Deuteronomy 5-29