So Close, Yet So Far Away

July 10, 2016
Deut. 4

I begin today by pointing out to you something many of you would like to forget. Take your age and subtract 40. What do you have? Oh, and if you are 58 or older, never mind because you have just ceased to exist. You are dead. Just sit back and listen for a minute. So, if you are 58 or less, how much do you remember the events of 40 years ago? How much are they a part of your thinking?

Now, some of you, perhaps most of you will say, “I was not even born 40 years ago!” Exactly. So, by definition, you do not remember events from 40 years ago. Your understanding of life comes from what you have experienced since 40 years ago. Welcome to the setting of Moses’ address to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses is 120 years old here. And the next oldest people would be Caleb and Joshua, and all the rest of the millions of people are less than 58 or so. The oldest among them were just kids when they left Egypt. They perhaps were born at the base of Mt. Sinai. Or their lives were spent in tents in the desert. This has been their world. They have grown up hearing about this place called the “Promised Land”. They have been told they will someday live there. They vaguely remember this scene of fire and smoke on the mountain. But their world has been lived as wanderers in the desert.

But this lone old guy named Moses has one more message in him before he dies. He has led the people to this place just east of the Jordan River. They finally are ready to enter the land, go into battle against the inhabitants, see what their new homes would look like. But before Moses dies, he has some things on his heart that he needs to share. This is the book of Deuteronomy. Don’t worry, we are not going all the way through the book, that would be repetitive to what we have just studied. After all, we have lived all these events with Moses. But not our children. Our children did not live through it. Or, they were too young to have a proper perspective on it. So Moses feels the need to tell them, to preach to them, giving a proper perspective on what took place so long ago.

Over these next few weeks, I hope to bring our study of the life of Moses to a conclusion by drawing some of the highlights from this great sermon.
Today, we begin right where we left off last week in Numbers 27. In fact, I took on more last week than I anticipated when I laid out my preaching schedule. So my sermon this morning is actually going to take on Deuteronomy 4, rather than chapter 3.

And what we find here is Moses giving perspective to this next generation on what has happened and what lies ahead. In a sense, he is looking back and looking forward at the same time, knowing that looking in both those directions is crucial. So, hear these words to the next generation of Israelites as they get ready to take their place in the history of the people of God. Know that it comes to us as the Word of God. READ Deut. 4:25-40.

Main point: History shows the LORD is God. There is no other. Remember that!

As we have said so often, and Moses here would amen, the Church is always only one generation away from extinction. And so, it is crucial that this generation, and the next generation, and the next generation after that be reminded of the truths learned throughout history. Know there will ALWAYS be temptation to turn away from the truth, water down the truth, accept others' views as equally valid truth. But history shows, there is one truth, THE truth. And Moses wants us to remember it.

So, if you are here today and perhaps your parents brought you, or your wife dragged you here, or your here to make your grandmother happy, know that God's purposes for your being here are grander than that. You need to be reminded of the truth. (2 parts)

I. Do not take your home in the Promised Land for granted. If you rebel against the LORD, you too will spend time in the wilderness. vv. 25-31

What happened to the Israelites needs to be fresh in the minds of every generation. Every generation will be tempted to reject the LORD and follow
after someone or something else. But they must know that distress will follow. And yet, even then the LORD will be faithful, gracious, and merciful.

25 After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God and provoking him to anger,

Remember, he is already addressing the 2nd generation. These are the children of those who witnessed the plagues in Egypt and the encounter with God at Mt. Sinai. So, his instruction is for generations 2, 3, and 4. Those generations must know that they too will face the temptation to rebel against God. I imagine the sense of this as sitting in their nice homes (that they did not build) enjoying abundant foods (that they did not plant), living a good and quiet life. They will be the beneficiaries of all the struggles of the 1st generation. And yet, they will forget the lessons of the 1st generation.

26 I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. 27 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you.

In other words, this “Promised Land” is not an entitlement. It is a gift that has been entrusted to them. It was given to them in trust, it can and will be taken from them by the same LORD who gave it to them, if they rebel as did the 1st generation. They died outside the Promised Land. The process of bringing them in will be reversed. The 70 relatives of Jacob who went to Egypt has turned into the millions camped by the Jordan, but will be decimated back to just a “few of you” when they rebel.

28 There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell.

Can you see how ridiculous this is? Why would anyone worship a god made by man and expect it to deliver you? By definition, it cannot be god. By
observation, it is clear it is not real. Who would do such a thing? And yet, people do it all the time. Why? For precisely that reason. You can see it, take it with you. This point will made quite forcefully in the next section. We instinctively want a god we can see and touch. But that is why we need to be reminded of events such as the encounter at Sinai, the plagues in Egypt.

You all know the desire of every generation to see god. All must be convinced that our God is real. Each and every generation will have to face this issue. This generation is no different.

But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. 30 When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. 31 For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

And yet, when that future generation gets tired of living outside the blessings of God, and they finally repent and turn to Him, He will restore them to a position of blessing. This is the amazing truth about our God. His mercies are new every morning. He does not desire to alienate, but to reconcile. He wants to bless. He wants to forgive. That is his nature. He is faithful, even when we are not. If this future generation will turn to Him, He will bless them. It is a promise. The promise is still in force, just as it was over 3,000 years ago.

Can you see how this relates to us? Our own sense of history starts with us. We have to be taught any history before our time. This generation’s view of war is much different from the Vietnam generation, which is much different from the World War II generation. So, we have to teach about the realities of war to each generation. Likewise, this generation’s view of God is much different from the views of just a few generations ago, when everyone went to church, it was a matter of which church. Now we live in a generation where being active in church is the exception, not the rule. Tolerance of differing views is the dominant thought of our day. Keeping private about your own personal views is of highest priority. That is a much different world than the one I grew up in.
No, passing on the truths to the next generation must be of highest importance to us. Seeing the blessing of God upon us as a gift entrusted to us rather than a birthright to which we are entitled is the challenge of each generation. We must know that as surely as we have been blessed, so could that blessing be removed from us.

II. The LORD has shown that He alone is God.

In many ways, the experiences of that generation were totally unique. You will see that in the text. And yet, I believe each generation needs to be just as clear about what they have witnessed in their generation. Each generation has its story to tell. You see, our LORD is alive and active. Right?

32 Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? 33 Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?

As I suggested, that generation of Israelites experienced something totally unique. No one before nor since had that same experience on that same scale. He here reminds them that their experiences needed to be passed down to the future generations who were not there. What they experienced was so amazing, so awe inspiring that future generations would have difficulty believing it. And yet, as Moses here recounts, their stories must be told. Yahweh is a spirit, without shape or form. But they heard the voice of God. They saw the fire on the mountain. They may have been young, but they saw it, heard it, experienced it.

34 Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?
No other god has ever done what Yahweh has done. No other god has taken his people out of a nation without war, freeing them from slavery and receiving plunder without having to steal it or fight for it. The Egyptians gave them their gold! When has that ever happened? Never.

35 You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other.

There is the key. He did all that so that this generation would know that Yahweh alone is God. There is no other god besides Him. I can think of no more important message than this one for not only that generation, but for each generation, but especially our generation. For them, they were going into a land already inhabited by 7 nations, with all of their own gods. They only knew the God of Moses. They lived practically their whole lives as a wandering community. But now they would hear about, be enticed by other thinking. Each and every god would be vying for their affections.

If anything our generation is in even a worse situation. The highest value of our world is tolerance for and equivalence of all beliefs. The most politically incorrect and insensitive statement could be “Yahweh is God and there is no other.” How dare we say that! “Those people over there who believe differently, they are my friends. Are you saying they are wrong and going to hell?” It is not me saying it. It is Scripture saying it. It is Moses saying it. It is Yahweh saying it. It is the truth. It is their experiences which were teaching it. Each generation’s story is tied to this truth. This is the central or basic truth of all of Scripture. Without this truth, the rest crumbles. You must have this truth as your foundation.

The history of their whole lives was designed to teach them that truth. Again, we can learn from their history or not. That choice is up to us. But the truth is the truth!

36 From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire.

Uniquely, they experienced the presence of this invisible God. They never saw Him, but they heard His voice, they saw His glory. They were witnesses of the awe and splendor. The message was clear. Even though they had to
experience the disciplining hand of this One true God, they also had the experience of having an encounter with Him never duplicated before nor since.

37 Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, 38 to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today.

He was the One who led them, defeated their stronger foes, is here giving them a home. He did it, and wants them to know that He did it because He is a God who keeps His promises. He loves His people. He has chosen to have a special loving relationship with them, uniquely them.

Pause: can you see how different this is from the prevailing world view? There is only One true God, who chooses to have a loving relationship with a particular people of His choosing. How well do you think that would go over? All other faiths hope to entice their gods to bless them. Ours chooses us and blesses us first, because that is who He is. We do not, we cannot earn His favor. The only thing we can do is respond with thanks, obedience, faith.

Our faith says He is the truth and we must accept it. If we do, things will go well with us. The prevailing view is to choose whatever you want to be your god. As long as your beliefs in your god bring you comfort, have at it. Ours says there is only true belief. We will experience comfort when we accept that truth for ourselves. Can you see the difference?

39 Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. 40 Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.

I point you to the time references, “this day, today, for all time.” It is in this sense that each generation has to face the same issue. The truth is the truth is the truth. But unless this generation, today accepts the truth as the truth, they are in danger of losing any position of blessing.
I cannot help but express my fear for the future of this nation. Just the events of this past week again show that we have fallen. We are not what we once were. We as a society do not hold dear the value of life, the respect of the law, the lives of those who protect us. I must sound the alarm that this is a terrible path to be on. This path leads to destruction, enslavement, defeat. We must turn back before it is too late. We as Christians must stand up for what is right and against that which is wrong. The One true God expects no less from His people.

We too live in a land of blessing. Having traveled to other lands, I can testify that we have been blessed. We must not take this blessing for granted. It can be taken from us as easily as it was given to us. We are not entitled to it. We did not earn it. We have been entrusted with it. And quite frankly, our generation has let it go to pot, literally! My generation has watched the destruction of families, of communities, of law and order. Who would have thought that we would ever see a day when murders of dozens of people every weekend in cities like Chicago would be routine, ho hum? Who would have thought that we would see the day when it is more dangerous to be a police officer than it is to be a criminal?

No, we have some soul searching to do. We have some history to study. We have some truth to consider. We can’t be too far from the One True God saying, “I’ve had enough!”

If we believe this is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will remind ourselves of the duty we have to pass the truth to the next generation.

2) We will not get comfortable in our present prosperity, thinking it is our birthright.

3) We will not get sucked into the thinking of the day that all gods are equal.

4) We will share THE story and our stories to the next generation.