

“By the Grace of God”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
22 November 2020*

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

⁷For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Scripture tells us that the Children of Israel had spent forty years wandering in the desert and were now waiting to enter into the Promised Land. These Israelites, save Joshua and Caleb, were not the ones who had escaped from Egypt under God’s protection. No, those people were gone, dead, all of them, because of their sins. Instead, it was their descendants, given the chance to start fresh and learn how to be God’s people, who would enter into their inheritance. But before they could do that, they had to listen to Moses, who would recapitulate the law, offer some observations, and then step aside to let this new generation receive the land promised to their forebears so long ago.

Except it probably didn’t happen that way. This is most likely not a transcript or even a paraphrase of what Moses said to the people. We can surmise that although tradition holds that Moses was the Torah’s author—hence the appellation the “Five Books of Moses”—he did not write the book of Deuteronomy, in particular its ending, which contains a report of his death in the hill country overlooking Canaan.

Instead, we believe that Deuteronomy was written much later, that it was perhaps the heart of the scroll found in the Temple in the time of Josiah, a time when the Kingdom faced existential pressure from its neighbor Assyria. Judah was but a rump state, the remnant of those who had come into the land long ago. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was gone, and the state of Judah was battling syncretic forces undermining its religion, and therefore its identity.

It was in this environment that Deuteronomy was written, assembled by priests and editors as a commentary, a midrash on Genesis through Numbers, and in some ways an introduction to the rest of the Deuteronomic history that begins in Joshua and continues through Second Chronicles, in order to give direction to a people in an uncertain and perilous time. It is both rooted in the tradition of the past and shaped by the present circumstance that the nation had to confront.

Thus, an idealized vision of their history is offered, one that allows the people to imagine a past that will prepare them for life in the future. Perhaps this sounds like indulging a dream or encouraging nostalgia, which have the potential not to equip people for the living of full lives but to help them avoid a potentially messy reality. I do not believe that is the case, however. We must know where we have been before we can go forward. Past is indeed prologue.

Strikingly, the rich scene that is painted here—of a prosperous people living in a land teeming with all good things—is tinged by the sad prospect of one in which Israel will forget her God.

This wasn't a baseless fear, either. Remember, Moses had to deal with those contentious ex-slaves. Just after leaving Egypt, they were complaining. Then, all through the centuries, as their fortunes waxed and waned, the people of Judah and Israel often divorced their prosperity from the God who made all things possible. Those who were rich were especially susceptible to this misconception, following the path of greed and selfishness. Now, in a moment of refounding, the author of Deuteronomy sought to direct the attention of his audience to a better, truer way, one that never lost sight of the hand of God in one's life, the God who made wealth possible.

That wealth, whether financial, social, or emotional, wasn't so much a *quid pro quo*, the Lord's direct response to specific actions of humans. It wasn't something that could be earned. Instead, it was a product of God's grace, God's love for each of us and all of us.

It is true that we work hard; that some of us are creative, others energetic; that we may have spent time in school or apprenticing to someone. In that sense, we have earned our wealth. But who among us can claim to be responsible for his or her intelligence? No, that was the bequest of our ancestors and their DNA. Taken a step further, who

among us had anything to do with our being born? Did we decide that on a particular date our mothers would give birth to us? That she would become pregnant? That she would meet our father? Of course not. Ultimately, we had nothing to do with our own nativities. Nothing. Despite any hardships we have had to endure during our lifetimes, we have been blessed to be alive.

This is what it means for us to say that God makes possible our wealth. God may not put in the hours, make the thing, do the actual heavy lifting, or whatever else it takes to do our jobs, but God has made it possible for us to do all these things, and for that we should be grateful.

Grace is an amazing, mysterious thing. It isn't something that we can poke or prod, disassemble or reconstruct. It is beyond our understanding. But to paraphrase Potter Stewart, I may not be able to define grace, but I know it when I see it.

Each of us has experienced grace. It may be hard to remember, especially during these unsettled times when we continue to contend with the coronavirus, but I would suggest that it is essential at moments just like the present for us to recall moments of grace in our lives.

Is there any good in the virus itself? No, but good things can be made even out of the worst of situations. We look around us, and what do we focus on? The dislocation, the hardship? Perhaps. But I hope that we would also stand back in awe, as we contemplate the work of researchers who are at this very moment developing and delivering vaccines.

Again, it is a matter of perspective.

If we go through life with a sense of entitlement, I promise you that we will always feel a gnawing sense of want. But if we go through life with a sense of gratitude, I assure you, we will always feel an affirming sense of wonder and possibility.

As this is stewardship season, and Thanksgiving is just around the corner, I invite you to consider our church's finances. Even after this year's stock market roller-coaster ride and the sudden stumble the economy took in the spring, our finances are solid. Everybody on the staff is being paid. We continue to generously fund our mission priorities. We offer both live and taped worship every week, and our Children's Community Corner continues to be there for our kids. After the first ten months of our fiscal year, our income is slightly ahead of our expenses, and we have every expectation that we will finish this year with a balanced budget.

We have benefited from generous congregants, faithful volunteers and trustees, skillful endowment managers, and yes, a government PPP loan. That loan afforded us flexibility in managing the upheaval in the economy earlier this year, allowing us to leave money in

our portfolio and give it a chance to appreciate during the market's recovery these past months. Good financial management? Sure. God's grace at work? You bet.

Again, it all comes down to perspective. We thank God for what he has made possible. But how is it we express our thanks? Simply mouthing the words, and then moving on to the next thing on our agenda, really is not enough. We need to express our gratitude through our actions as well as our words.

We do this through our stewardship, through our support of special offerings, through our volunteering of time, through the values we impart to our children and the example we set for them. Stewardship takes on many forms, and each of us does what he or she can do. Together, it all adds up.

Our church continues to be a vital outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven. We try to discern the Lord's will and to reflect in our witness what we believe Jesus would have us do.

Today, in addition to being Stewardship Sunday, is known in the church year as "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ" Sunday. I prefer the former term because it reminds us of who Christ is—our monarch. And offering this affirmation on the final Sunday of the liturgical year seems so appropriate. Next week we will move into a new liturgical cycle, as we begin Advent and prepare for the birth of the Christ child—who today we confess is king. Next week we will once again begin a formal season of repentance and anticipation. Today, we affirm who it is to whom we will repent and who it is we anticipate.

I would note that it is not just today on which we should proclaim that Christ is King. Nor is it just today that we can be stewards. Instead, these are things to do every day, in every place. As we contemplate stewardship—of our finances, of our skills and talents, of our ministry in a newly reconfigured landscape, of our society, of God's creation—I believe that we would do well to remember that God's grace has enabled us to do much and will surely empower us in the future.

Self-reliance is good, but it will only take us so far. We are creatures meant to live in community, to be with others, to let our loved ones and our friends be of help, to remember, as the old cliché has it, that we are all in this together.

Recall what today's passage from Deuteronomy seeks to do—teach us that it is because of God that we are able to earn wealth, to be well, to live together in a commonwealth. Keep this thought front and center as we think about today's passage from Matthew, the concluding verses of Chapter 25, the so-called Judgment of the Nations, with its division of the people into sheep and goats.

Preachers often focus on the goats, guilting their congregants into doing something. I'd rather focus today on the sheep. Here Jesus—the King—tells us how we can please God:

³⁵“[F]or I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

We are each able to do these things. We can look at one another to see where there is need. We can look to the community beyond us to see who needs our help. We can hear these words and interpret them either narrowly or capaciously. We can see hunger as merely the absence of food to eat, or we can imagine that it also includes a deep yearning for meaning. We can see sickness as just being ill, whether with the virus or something else, or we can realize that it also can include a deformed spirit, mixed-up priorities.

The six mercies described in the Gospel lesson are just a few of the ways in which we can serve Jesus the King, ways we can be disciples in deed and not just words, ways we can be stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. God has given us much, including the ability to do great and wondrous things, like caring for his people, tending to his creation, and witnessing through our actions to the power and the grace of his Gospel.