



**“The Promised Land”**  
**Scripture – Deuteronomy 34**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, November 20, 2016**

Today we arrive at the final chapter of the story of Moses. It is a lengthy tale that narrates an adventure that begins with slavery and ends with a view of the Promised Land.

Scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures peg the time of Moses and the Exodus to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. The stories that comprise this epic adventure were handed down orally for centuries before they were compiled in a single written narrative. It goes without saying that the story was written from a particular point of view – the view of the Hebrew people.

That does not mean that the story is entirely fiction. It is based on certain historical events. The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt, they were liberated by one of God’s greatest servants, Moses, the journey from Egypt to the place they finally settled was long and arduous, during their wilderness journey they acquired the commandments by which they were to live, the people vacillated between faithfulness and disobedience, and eventually, they reached the land where they lived for centuries.

The stories are not told simply to preserve a record of the early days of the Hebrew people. Rather, they are told in a particular way that shapes the identity of the Jewish people.

Today, much of what passes for American history is told in a similar manner. Our children are taught the story of the United States from a particular point of view in order to create a shared American identity.

U.S. history is not taught from the point of view of those who inhabited this land for thousands of years before Europeans arrived. “Nor is it told from the point of view of African-Americans or Mexican-Americans. Even a story told from the point of view of European-Americans could be quite different if it were described by the Tories during the revolutionary period or from the eyes of the poor in any period.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past couple of decades there have been some modifications in the way U.S. history is taught, but many school systems continue to resist other viewpoints. Scholar John Cobb notes: “For many Americans the role of teaching American history is to incorporate new generations, of all ethnicities, into a celebratory account that makes them proud of their American identity. Such an account cannot dwell on the near genocide of the native peoples or the repeated breaking of treaties with them.”<sup>2</sup>

So, it should come as no surprise to us that the Hebrew people who passed down the stories from generation to generation, and those who later assembled the stories in written form, did not simply state the facts. Like all

historians, they interpreted events. They were convinced that God played a crucial role in all they experienced. They detected God's hand in their liberation, their journey through the wilderness, the constituting of their law, and their conquest of other tribes.

As we read the Moses saga today, we see that one of the overriding themes of this amazing epic is that when the people were faithful to God life went well, but when the people turned away from God, life was harsh. As you and I know, that simplistic explanation of life does not always hold up. There are unworthy people who reap good fortune and worthy people who suffer hardships.

Following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, and after wandering through the wilderness for "forty years" – the Bible's way of saying "an extended period of time" – the people needed a place to settle. The Promised Land refers to a particular plot of land the ancient Hebrews occupied after brutally driving out the people who inhabited the land.

Several times in the Book of Deuteronomy, the author claims that the land was God's gift to the people. Then, in the book that follows, Joshua, the author states that God wanted them to have the land and insured military victories to capture it. We need to bear in mind that this interpretation of history is written by the conquering army as a justification for taking the land away from others.

However, the Promised Land not only refers to a slice of terra firma next to the Mediterranean Sea, it is also a metaphor for a place that represents happiness and satisfaction – life as God intends it to be. The phrase has been used by numerous writers, poets, and musicians throughout history. The pilgrims talked of North America as a Promised Land where they could exercise their religion freely. The Promised Land was used in African American spirituals to represent a time when they would live as free citizens of the United States. Pop musicians Chuck Berry and Bruce Springsteen both sang songs about the Promised Land. Christians have used it as a metaphor for both heaven and the future point in history when God's kingdom is present on earth: when justice prevails and peace reigns. The prophets Isaiah and Micah offer their vision of the Promised Land with identical words, describing it as a time when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus shared his vision of the Promised Land in his first sermon when he read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Four years ago, while I was on Sabbatical, Camilla and I stood where Moses stood – on the summit of Mount Nebo, in what is now Jordan. It provides a sweeping view of a large portion of land that may not appear much different than it did in the time of Moses. Then, as now, you can look to the northwest and see the city of Jericho 15 miles away, which in the time of Moses was already over 7,000 years old. If you turn to the southwest, you can see the Dead Sea 20 miles in the distance. It is a breathtaking view and Moses may not have believed his eyes. After all of those years and after all of the turmoil he endured to drag his stiff-necked people there, he finally laid eyes on it.

But laid eyes on it is all. It is one of the great ironies of the Bible, that Moses liberated his people from slavery, led them through the trials of the wilderness, endured constant complaining for 40 years, and delivered them to the Promised Land, but then died before stepping foot in it.

But isn't that what makes it such an apt metaphor of the life of faith. We catch glimpses of the Promised Land and strive to do our part in making it a reality, even though we know we will not reach it in our lifetimes.

These days, it feels as if the Promised Land is far, far away. With people feeling emboldened to express views that are racist, homophobic and xenophobic, it feels as if we have trekked back down from Mount Nebo and returned to the wilderness. But dark powers put up their greatest fight when they fear they are on the verge of being conquered.

Life is a series of challenges. Like Moses, people of faith are challenged daily to prove that our commitment to God is genuine. More than a thousand years after the time of Moses, Jesus was asked, “Which commandment in the law is greatest?” He responded by quoting from the Moses saga: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5) and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18)

We see glimpses of the Promised Land when people who are hungry are fed out of our abundance. We see glimpses of the Promised Land when people care for God’s creation. We see glimpses of the Promised Land when people of different races respect one another. We see glimpses of the Promised Land when people of different sexual orientations are welcomed and treated equally. We see glimpses of the Promised Land when people of different religions sit with one another and learn from one another.

We do not get to the Promised Land until we live like citizens of the Promised Land. We dare not act like the complainers in the wilderness constantly bemoaning our difficulties. Instead, we must focus on what we can do in our sphere of influence. One scholar reminds us “that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up.”<sup>2</sup>

We can live as if we will never escape the wilderness or we can live as people who have glimpsed the Promised Land.

## NOTES

1. John B. Cobb, Jr., “Lectionary Commentary,” *processandfaith.org*, October 9, 2005.
2. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, “We Were Made for These Times.”

### **Prayers of the People ~ Susan Moseley**

O Lord, you are the ground of our being and your presence fills every mystery of our universe. We cannot find truth... nor alter wisdom... apart from you.

Just as you led the Israelites thru the wilderness toward the land of promise, lead us, we pray. Be the Light in our darkness. Help us discover hope thru hospitality, abundance thru generosity, healing thru compassion, and peace thru forgiveness.

How blessed we are to be gathered today in the company of friends, bathed in the beauty of powerful story, prophetic sermon, and inspiring music. In this season of thanksgiving may we not be shy in giving thanks for all we enjoy. Yet keep us, we pray, from indifference...knowing this season does not bring bounty to every home and table.

Help us, O God, to make this holiday one which enlarges the generosity of our hearts and the readiness of our hands to serve others.

For those far away...children, parents and friends, mission personnel, and service personnel, we lift up prayers for their safety. For the migrant, refugee and immigrant too, we pray for safe passage and ready shelter for their weariness.

Holy God, may your spirit, which rises above political persuasion, national borders, language and race, blanket this war-weary world. May we seek peace in our hearts, in our homes and in our communities, so that others may witness your kingdom among us...so that they may catch glimpses of the Promised Land. May your will to be born within us and reform the world around us.

For we who walk the path of Jesus, know it is always your will that we love one another in the way that you have so loved us. And so we continue our prayer with the words that Jesus taught his disciples to pray saying...

Our Father who art in heaven...hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen