

Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land

Peering Over the Edge

[Deuteronomy 30:11-20](#)

We've been wandering around in the wilderness with the Israelites in these last weeks (maybe these last years). Like them, we have been on our way to the promised land. A land where we will be free, making the decisions and doing the work that bring us fully alive. Keeping the promises that make us God's people. Along the way, we've learned some things about falling and standing up again, losing faith and finding it again, where to reach for courage when we are afraid. In the stories from Exodus I hope you've been reminded, as I have, that the Bible's stories are rich—full of lessons about how we live now, no matter how ancient those stories are. Today we're jumping all the way to the end of the story of the Israelites' forty-year journey, to the very edge of the promised land. Not because Exodus is out of interesting stories. But because we're out of weeks.

Moses had been the people's leader since they escaped from Egypt. Moses was a good leader. He kept explaining to them this God they were trying to understand and follow. He stuck with his people, loved them even on the days they made him angry, and the days they decided he wasn't so great either. Just like every leader, Moses made mistakes. Sometimes he was just what they needed; sometimes he too got tired and frustrated and short on faith.

Somewhere along the way, Moses realized that he wasn't going to get all the way to the end of the journey with his people. He was sure *they* would get there—to the land of milk and honey, the promise that kept them going all those years. But as they marched—or maybe trudged—up that last hill before they could see into the valley, Moses knew that his part of the trip with them was over. That whatever lay ahead for them—everything that might feel like a promise fulfilled, what they'd been waiting for, and no doubt struggles they hadn't even begun to imagine—they'd do with a new leader. Moses wouldn't be with them.

Moses has one more sermon in him, one final set of words that he hopes God's people—*his* people—will take with them into this new place they've been dreaming about. The words that were our Scripture reading this morning are taken from that sermon. You can see why I thought this text might have something to say to us today.

You already know what will bless you, what will give you life, Moses says to the people. You learned those lessons out in the desert. It was when you were hungry and homeless and afraid that you learned the things that matter. Remember how every time you thought there was some insurmountable obstacle in front of you—a whole army of Egyptians, an ocean of impassable water, a wasteland with nothing that looked like food—every time, God got you through it? That time when you messed things up completely, falling for some gold statue of a calf instead of waiting for God's laws, remember that God was willing to start all over again with you?

You don't actually even need a leader to tell you what God is saying, Moses tells them. The word of God is very close to you: “in your mouth and in your heart”. Don't forget those things now. Hold onto those commandments, those lessons, those memories of how God keeps showing up. Keep going back to them.

When you go into this promised land, Moses said, it won't look like the desert, where you knew you'd get lost if you wandered off by yourself. The challenges will be different. You won't be slaves or wanderers

any more. You'll have stability—that thing you've longed for. You'll also have choices. Choices between things that will bring you blessings and things that will look shiny and new and much easier. Choices between insisting on organizing your life the way it has always been before and making space for God to do something new. Choices between loyalty to small things and trust in ultimate things, the things that will bring you life.

Choose life, Moses says to the people. *Choose life*.

I love those words, but what do they mean? What does it mean to 'choose life'?

This is the point where reasonable preachers might differ, take paths that sound almost opposite to one another. Someone could preach a very nice sermon this morning on how Moses' last words are about sticking to the things you know. The timeless Ten Commandments. Traditions that have stood the test of time. The values that made sense to your grandparents, and that we'd better hold onto—even stronger now—because the world is changing fast. And I have no doubt that this is *part* of what God is still speaking in the Bible's inspired words.

But when I think about what the Israelites saw in those days out in the wilderness, and what I've learned in the hardest days of my life and your life and our life together, about who God is and how God shows up carrying holiness and truth and whatever it is we need to sustain us in that moment—then I want to preach a different sermon. Because I think everything I have seen tells me that God is bigger—less predictable, more uncontrollable, more *surprising*—than the old rules. Than *any* rules, or law, or book, or church, can hold.

I think that when we *choose life* we are consenting to being surprised. By life. By God.

There's no question we get mixed messages about this. Religion has always promised people solid ground to stand on, a firm foundation for a good life. Follow this prescription, and you will be fine. Your life will be good—not only now, but for all eternity.

But our experience tells us something different. From this perspective it looks like God is *not* always standing by to reward good behavior. The right thing *doesn't* always happen. God's 'program' seems not what we thought it should be.

We are not the first ones to have noticed this. The Bible has always defied logic and human experience. Jesus' words have always seemed impractical, or at least mysterious. St. Augustine said, way back in the 5th century, "If you think you understand God, then what you understand cannot be God." The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth said, a hundred years ago, 'Faith isn't actually like standing on solid ground. It's more like being suspended—hanging without ground under our feet.' Trying to live—or even understand—a life of faith has always left people off balance.

Clergy—pastors—often tell the stories of their 'call to ministry'. Telling a story about your call—what led you to choose a life in the church instead of being a lawyer or a nurse or a teacher—is part of the path to ordination, and it's part of how pastors get to know each other. It's the question we ask one another instead of "Where did you grow up?"

Lots of my colleagues in ministry can point to a single moment when they heard God's voice, or saw clearly that they could be happy in no other profession. Some, like Pastor Daniel, knew it from the time they were very young—maybe even 5 or 6.

Not me. There have been lots of moments—especially in these last three years—when I have felt deeply and completely contented in this work I do. But there never was one moment when I was sure God was telling me that leading a church would be the right and only thing for me. My calling to ministry feels more like a river with a strong current. It pulls me toward it, but I'm a little bit afraid of it too, resistant. I have to clear away the underbrush in my life—my ego, my worries about success, my wish that church only operated Monday through Friday—before I can make my way down the bank and step into the water. Let it take me wherever it will.

The river has carried me—to places I had no idea I was meant to go. Sometimes I try to climb out of the water, to scramble back to the safer-looking bank. It's dangerous in there. There are rocks under the surface. The rapids are faster than I had counted on. There might be a big waterfall around the next corner. If I don't get out now, I might not be able to later.

The spiritual work of my life is to stay in that river, not to jump out every time I get scared or discouraged. To trust that whatever surprising thing is around the next bend, it too will have goodness in it. That's not just about a calling to ministry. That's what it means to have faith.

Choose life, Moses said—which is another way of saying, 'have faith'. Choose this life that won't always look like some solid principle you can wrap your arms around. It is not chicken soup for the soul. It will not always match what you learned in kindergarten. It's something different than your fierce determination to make yourself a better person.

It's believing—trusting, deep down—that God is in this life. Your messy, confusing, un-fixable, not-always-pretty life.

This God will always be a little beyond your grasp, hard to understand or put into words. This God—the one who led his people to the promised land the *long* way—will refuse to behave predictably. This God is always alive, changing, re-adjusting—because surprising things happen. And this God will never stop taking you to places that require you to change too.

Your work—in some ways your only work—is to get in the river. To let yourself be surprised. To allow for the possibility that something outside your own well-thought decisions, your sureness about what's good for you and your willpower to make that thing happen, can move you toward life, freedom, wholeness.

When the ground beneath your feet begins to shift—as it certainly will—your life is calling you to let go of that branch on the riverbank that you've been clinging to. To trust that you will not drown as the current carries you toward an unfamiliar landscape. The destination may not be an easy, prosperous life. This river is no placid, unmoving pool. There will be waves, discomfort. There will be scary moments. But all shall be well. That's what our living, moving, always-surprising God promises. All shall be well.

Have you heard it in the stories of the Exodus?
I know you have seen it in your own history, the story of your life.
We have known it—together—in the life of this church.

Choose life.