

“The Promised Land”

On April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt, while vacationing in Warm Springs, Georgia, suffered a stroke and died. He had served as President of the United States for twelve years, longer than any other person in U.S. history. He had led the country through what was probably the greatest crisis in its history (except maybe for the Civil War) with the Great Depression and World War II. On the home front, he had provided a vision to make the people economically stable again, and on the foreign front, he had led the efforts against the forces of tyranny of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo.

Like Moses, the subject of today’s scripture from Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Roosevelt was able to see the promised land but did not live to go into it. The focus of our sermon today is the question, “What is the Promised Land?” What is our vision of “The Promised Land?” As leaders, what do we need to be doing today to bring people to “The Promised Land?”

As Moses is able to see the Promised Land and then dies, he is eulogized. He is the unequalled leader of the nation. He was able to wield a miraculous power against Pharaoh and all his empire. He had a special charismatic leadership with which has was believed to have been endowed. His unflinching courage and commitment at a time when the majority of the nation had been discouraged in the

face of the spies, when 10 of the 12 said the promised land was full of enemies who were too big to defeat. But Moses persevered and moved the people forward. He was also instrumental in his mediation with God on Israel's behalf in bringing the tablets of the law on which they could have a nation.

Foremost, Moses was a prophet, in whom the prophetic skills were more fully developed than in any other. He was a person the people regarded as an inspired teacher and proclaimer of the will of God. He taught them about God's justice and mercy.

Moses led the people out of bondage, out of oppression. He was constantly with them as they struggled with their emancipation. Although they were loosed from slavery, it took them a while to be truly free. They not only had to be free from the Egyptians, they had to be free from their dependence on other Gods. They had to be taught to have their complete faith in Yahweh.

The people also had to learn to be free of greed, free of material objects. A lesson for them, and for us, is that true freedom means reliance only on Yahweh for our material needs. In Exodus 33, following the debacle of the Golden Calf, the primary condition for a resumed relationship with Yahweh is the "stripping of ornaments" (vv.4,6). The lesson from the text here is that the people need to be deeply aware of the destructive power of "community fetishes" of endless

fascination with natural objects that they believe enhance their worth. The requirement for resumed covenant is divestment and unburdening of the adornments of self-sufficiency which impede and preclude a meaningful relationship with God. In Mark 10:17-22, the rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell all he owns and give it to the poor. He could not do this because of his many possessions.

How many of us face the same practical problem today in our consumer driven society? Greed can make us desire things we really do not need. Greed can skewer and damage our relations with our neighbors. When you already have the real estate you need and you desire the property of your neighbor who needs it himself to live, you are not following the tenth commandment which says you are not to desire your neighbor's house or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to him. The eighth commandment says not to steal. This is much deeper than taking a television set from a store. It means taking something that you do not need or deserve.

What was taught by Moses in the wilderness in the Ten Commandments was to be a lesson for the time of "The Promised Land" and is a lesson for us today. We are not to hoard material supplies. In the Lord's prayer, we pray for our daily bread. We rely on God each day for what we need. This prayer is a reference to the

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
October 25, 2020

Israelites receiving the manna each day, and the manna would not last beyond that day.

The manner in which the manna was collected is also a lesson for us. In Exodus 16:16, the Lord commands the people to “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, according to the number of persons in each tent.” This command is a model for how the church shares and distributes goods with equity and liberality. You get what you need, but no more. In 2 Corinthians 8:8-15, Paul writes that equity in the Christian community results when those with abundance and those with needs live in generosity to each other.

What I conclude from the lessons of the wilderness, the Ten Commandments, and the teachings of Jesus is that in the Promised Land those who have more than adequate resources should be willing to help those who are less fortunate and in need. As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his sermon, “I See the Promised Land,” the sermon he gave the night before he was shot and killed in Memphis, TN, the preacher must be an Amos and say, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” As King put it, somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.”

Franklin Roosevelt had to deal with the problems of the poor. When he took office, the unemployment rate was 25%. He instituted as many government work - relief programs as he could. He put in place a minimum wage law, the first step in getting a living wage for workers. He put in place Social Security, in which workers pay into a system which eventually supports those who retire. Although initially meant only as supplemental income, it has become the only source of income for many retired Americans.

In his January 1941 State of the Union Speech, Roosevelt gave what is known as his Four Freedoms Speech. One of these freedoms is the freedom from want. Roosevelt realized that for one to be truly free, one must free from want. He spoke of the benefits of democracy, which include economic opportunity, employment, social security, and the promise of “adequate health care.”

Since the time of Roosevelt, we have done much to have freedom from want. But we still need to do more to get to the promised land. Many still need an adequate living wage so they do not need to work two to three jobs to have food and a roof over their head. We are failing greatly in having an adequate health care system. Of all the developed countries, people in the United States pay twice as much in health insurance premiums as anyone else and we have the 18th best health care system in the world. Although we do not necessarily have to use government

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
October 25, 2020

funded healthcare, we have got to get together and come up with a better plan on making sure we do not have uninsured people in our country, that all have adequate health insurance and that we have affordable health insurance. The sicknesses and hospitalizations during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown we can no longer wait to do something about this issue of health insurance.

I believe a core problem of our inadequate health care system is greed. Too many people are not willing to share the burden to make sure that all are insured. You might say, “Preacher Culp, you sound like you are preaching Socialism.” I’m not here today to preach capitalism or socialism or feudalism. I am preaching what I see as Judeo-Christian principles in how the community lives together. I am here to talk about practical ways we can make sure all in the community have what they need. Let’s adopt biblical principles so things are done right.

The reality is that we have way too much homelessness and poverty in our land of plenty in the United States. Dr. King preached 50 years ago that “It’s alright to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and His children who can’t eat three square meals a day. There are 70,000 homeless people in our nation’s capital, right next to two of three richest counties in the United States in

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
October 25, 2020

the state of Virginia. It's obvious that there is something wrong with this reality.

How does this happen in a land of Christian values?

Roosevelt also talked of being free from fear. Moses led his people in the face of the fear that came back with the reports of the giants in the promised land. Roosevelt, a charismatic leader like Moses, led the people through the fears of poverty and the fears of tyranny in the world during his time. He always knew it was critical to defeat the dark forces of Nazism and racism. He knew we must be continually struggling to bring freedom to all.

In the midst of the current struggle for justice, we must not be gripped by fear as we seek to love our neighbor as thyself. Change is fearful; we cannot downplay that. But we cannot let fear take us over. We cannot let our fears keep us from going into the Promised land. There are forces which do not want us to change But God was with the Israelites. And the God who parted the Red Sea and raised Jesus Christ from the dead is also with us. As Adam Hamilton writes in his book *Moses*, this means that no matter how tall the giants may be, if God is with us we can move forward, and somehow, some way, he will lead us into the "Promised Land."

All of us need a compelling vision of the Promised Land. As Hamilton writes, the task of us as leaders is to help us see what we cannot see and move us to

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
October 25, 2020

give ourselves in pursuit of a vision bigger than ourselves. That vision is meant to drive us, shape us, and move us to accept sacrifice and hardship along the way in pursuit of a better “there.”

In modern times, one of the most compelling pictures of the Promised Land was the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The night before he was shot to death, Dr. King preached, “I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

As you leave today, ask yourself what is the vision that drives you, the end to which your whole life is progressing? What is your Promised Land? Moses’ vision of the Promised Land was ultimately not about a piece of ground, but about a people who would love the Lord, hold fast for him, obey his commands, and who would love their neighbors as themselves. Is that your vision?