

Moving On

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
October 30, 2011
Reformation Sunday

Text: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

(NRSV)

¹ Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain--that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees--as far as Zoar. ⁴ The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; **I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.**" ⁵ **Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command.** ⁶ He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷ Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸ The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹ Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹ He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

The Sermon

According to the liturgical calendar put out by the Presbyterian Church (USA), this is Reformation Sunday. Maybe that's because if we Presbyterians observed what is known as Reformation Day, it would coincide with Halloween, and we all can guess which "special" day would get the most attention.

According to that amazing resource Wikipedia:

Reformation Day is a religious holiday celebrated on October 31 in remembrance of the Reformation, particularly by Lutheran and some Reformed church communities. It is a civic holiday in Slovenia (since the Reformation contributed to its cultural development profoundly, although Slovenes are mainly Roman Catholics) and in [certain] German states..... It is also a national holiday in Chile since 2008.

In the United States churches often transfer the festival, so that it falls on the Sunday (called Reformation Sunday) on or before October 31, with All Saints' Day moved to the Sunday on or after November 1.

I find it fascinating that Slovenia and Chile, both primarily Catholic nations, observe Reformation Day as a National Holiday. I guess if the Presbyterians and other denominations move the day to avoid Halloween, Catholic countries can use it as an excuse for another national holiday.

But this being Reformation Sunday, commemorating events with origins in the 16th century, and this being a Christian church whose origins date back to the 1st

century, and having our text today reflecting the early stages of the Judeo Christian faith tradition, helps me keep in focus that this 100+ year-old sanctuary in which we have the privilege of worshiping here in Coeur d'Alene, would be but a "modern" one by contrast to those in other parts of the world.

And by looking from the Coeur d'Alene First pulpit over to my right, and viewing the beautiful stained glass window that is dedicated to this congregation's first pastor, George Deffenbaugh, helps me realize that my sermon title "Moving On," is truly not about me or – for that matter it is not about your wonderful newly called Pastor Craig Sumey – who will become your next called pastor in mid-December.

Indeed, by looking at the impressive wall of photos of previous pastors that hangs in the Hunter Building, I'm reminded that while I carry the title "Interim Pastor" – meaning "Temporary Shepherd" – all who minister and serve the church or God's people, no matter how many years in a given place, are truly "temporary," and only the subsequent history of the congregation and its people provides some measure of our impact.

Referring again to today's text, I can say with certainty that I am no Moses, but I pray that I will have some opportunity to live a few more years so that I can rejoice when I learn of your congregation's growth and development under Pastor Craig's leadership.

In other words, while I expect to die at some point in God's timing for my life span, I trust that – unlike Moses – I will not die at God's command as this passage in Deuteronomy states was Moses' plight, only having seen the "land of promise" from a distance.

But I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank you once again for the privilege of serving these past two years as your "Temporary Shepherd," and thank you for all the love you have demonstrated, and continue to demonstrate for Kathy and me.

I would also be remiss if I did not express my deep appreciation for the gracious way in which Pastor Craig Sumey has included me in his process of discernment regarding seeking and now accepting the call to this pastorate, and the collegial relationship we've established in working on the transition in pastoral leadership. I can say without hesitation that the Pastor Seeking Committee did its work with great faithfulness and, in so doing, presented for your consideration and call a great next pastor of this flock, and a pastor who will be moving here in the company of his wonderful spouse Lynn, and their truly neat kids, Derek and Brynna.

You indeed have so much to be excited about, and to look forward to, and while I invite you to help celebrate Kathy's birthday by eating some cake following worship, and while she and I relish your expressions of appreciation and your expression of sadness in our leaving our respective roles with you, please know we'll be fine, and

it is truly time for you to move on, and for me to see if I can finally “Honorably Retire,” rather than postpone same yet one more time. Kathy does, however, request your prayers as she contemplates putting up with me all day every day.

But why this particular text from Deuteronomy on this particular day?

Because of far more significance than Kathy’s mental and emotional state – important as that may be – this text speaks to your circumstances as a congregation as you look forward to Pastor Craig’s arrival.

You may not be physically poised to enter a new land in geographical terms, as Israel is purported to be on one side of the Jordan River anticipating moving across to occupy the land of promise, but you are emotionally and spiritually poised to enter a new era of pastoral leadership.

I’m no Moses, and I doubt that Craig would compare himself to Joshua, but you do need to move from a time of preparation for entering into a period of settled leadership, to a time of embracing and celebrating that new leadership.

However, just as I was not your “Savior” because you already have one, neither is Craig about to become your Savior, because you continue to have one in Jesus Christ our Lord who is the head of the Church.

Just as in Deuteronomy there appear to be many hints that the Israelites have long been in the land and they need a slightly revised set of guidelines to cope with being settled neighbors rather than being a nomadic tribal people, so you as a congregation have long been together in some ways, and yet you are in continued need of guidelines for coming together across a wide variety of differences in other ways.

Some of those differences relate to age and stage in life. In terms of residence the younger generation usually moves out and moves on. But in a vital church a younger generation that often consists of children and grandchildren who are not biologically or in family terms connected with the older folk moves into the church.

Most every church I’ve experienced that has mostly older members declares its desire to be revitalized by younger people and younger families. Great concept. Great concept that is until these younger ones actually show up and the older folk are in shock at how different they are in so many ways from themselves and what they imagine to have been their “more ideal” families. We who are older have short memories, folk. As a pastor I’ve often been pulled aside by someone who has overheard someone else telling me how much better behaved their children and grandchildren were or are compared to these new folk, and I’m told, “You should have seen the brats they raised. They were terrors.” <g>

But even within this congregation’s similarly-aged members there are wide gaps in theological conviction of the life God calls us to, and in ways to interpret the Bible, and in matters of appropriate piety for Christians, and so forth. Such differences are often most apparent in matters of denominational approval or

disapproval for this or that, but the decisions of the General Assembly aside, they are imbedded within you.

That's not a bad thing. A church that becomes plain vanilla and loses other flavor options is a boring rather than dynamic body of Christ's people whether or not you can belt out how wonderful God is or how much you love Jesus.

Although Pastor Craig prayerfully and hopefully will be a unifying voice from both the pulpit and in other contexts, please don't make his theology or preaching style or whatever the lightning rod for your core theological issues. Work with Craig, and the Session, and the staff to find ways to discuss and grow and learn from and with each other in Christ-pleasing ways.

Consider how frustrating it must have been for Jesus to put up with his rascally and seemingly dense disciples. Talk about a diverse group! But what made them true disciples was not whether they agreed with each other, or even agreed with Jesus, but whether or not when Jesus said "Follow me," either in the initial call or in heading to the next town or even to Jerusalem, they did.

You'll do fine. You'll not behave perfectly, but you'll be fine.

But not if one group of theological proponents or another "wins" while others "lose" and feel they must move on.

You'll do fine if you attend to the forms of challenge found in books such as Deuteronomy which call the people of God to put matters of justice over matters of privilege; to put care for the most vulnerable over demanding the rights of the privileged, and of remembering that if we think the purpose of the church is to simply serve us and our instincts, we've lost our way.

And, unlike the people of Israel depicted in Deuteronomy, you have an advantage. In the case of Israel, Moses was the only leader they had ever known. Prior to his freeing them from Pharaoh, and leading them into a new future, they were really "no people" – just a bunch of slaves loosely connected in some tribal groupings, but by no means a group that appeared destined to have much of a future as a nation.

As I noted earlier, in the case of Moses, God ushered him off the leadership scene, Leadership is a tricky business. One can leave a called pastoral leadership role prior to truly "taking hold" and gaining the credibility needed to make important changes. One can also stay too long, and the spirit of an organization waxes and wanes wondering when or if they'll survive the dormant period.

But the beauty of this passage, is that there is a terminus.

Moses is dead and buried out of sight. The people grieve, but they move on to accept Joshua's leadership.

And, thanks be to God, we can each and all learn from that.