

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

February 13th, 2011
Blessings and Curses

Guest Preacher, Ken Thomas

My Hebrew Bible professor says Deuteronomy is like getting the car keys. If any of you have raised teenagers, or been teenagers, you know what I mean.

Here's the keys — Not so fast. Then it starts. Don't drive over the bridges you can't handle that traffic, be back by 11:00 latest, don't you dare drink while you have this car, don't pick up those guys at the mall, bring it back with same amount of gas as when you left. On and On — yes I have heard it all before, can I have the keys.

Well Deuteronomy is like that. The Hebrews have escaped Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. And they had this big deal at Mount Sinai, — God comes to the mountain top, thunder, lightning, stone tablets, golden calves, the Ten Commandments, and laws and decrees by the bushel, enough to fill up Leviticus. Finally they cross south of the Dead Sea, come up the east side after making a deal with the Edomites, and are standing on the plateaus on the east side of the Jordan ready to cross into the promised land. They are all lined up ready to go and Moses calls Joshua and the leaders together and says there it is, I am not going with you, but there it is — the promised land, go get it. And he is about to hand them the keys and then says — not so fast, one more thing. And then he goes on for 34 chapters.

A lot of it seems repetitious. Deuteronomy means second law. A lot of it is a replay of Sinai, but some of the material is given a new twist, and some new things are introduced. But it is Deuteronomy that introduces the covenant, and it includes, in the chapters immediately before this, the blessings and the curses. If you faithfully serve and obey me as your God, here are the blessings that you will enjoy. And if you do not, here are the curses that will befall you.

At the time the Deuteronomist historians were writing, the area we call Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, etc. was full of small city-states and tribes stuck between two great empires in Egypt and Assyria. It was common for the small kingdoms to enter into vassal treaties with one of the empires. We have records of these treaties and they follow a set formula.

Basically I, the Emperor Great Poobah agree that you the little kingdom, will pay me X amount of annual tribute, taxes, or some other name for extortion, send X numbers of men for 3 months each year to work on my public works, and if I get into a war, send me X number of your men as soldiers. And you will obey in any other way that is pleasing to me. In turn I will offer you my protection. I will protect you from your enemies, protect your trade routes and I won't attack you myself.

And then come the blessings and the curses, which were a standard part of all of these treaties. If you keep this agreement the rains will come, your crops will grow, you will have many sons, the Canucks will win the Stanley Cup — all manner of wonderful things will happen. But if you don't — look out. If you do this — that will happen, if you do that, this will happen. There will be droughts and locusts, boils on your head, your

cattle will die, your name will be reviled among all the nations, and for any of you who survive all of that, I will come and slaughter you. Actually, it is not that strange. We don't use the same language but, not long ago, during the cold war, the same dynamics were at play throughout much of the world between the US and the Soviet Union.

This form of agreement was common to that era. Therefore it is not surprising that the Deuteronomy covenant between God and his people conforms to that model. This does not diminish the power or the inspiration in any way, but it helps explain why it was expressed in this particular manner in Deuteronomy. It also emphasizes another key point about the Hebrew people's understanding of their relationship with their God. Other peoples are vassals who make earthly covenants and obey the empires of the world. The Hebrews, however, are in a covenant with their God. And their God does not require them to pay extortion. Their God requires them to avoid the worship of false gods, and to follow the commandments given to them about how to live together — be just to the widow and the orphan, the poor and the alien, and always remember to do this because 'you were poor and oppressed in Egypt, and it was this God who brought you out of bondage.'

We can see something very similar when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, in contrast to the kingdoms of this world.

Walter Bruggeman, renowned Old Testament scholar, says that both Deuteronomy and the earlier books of the Sinai law, in fact the whole Hebrew scripture, is about care of the neighbourhood. The Hebrews had been brought out of Egypt and were now about to enter a new land and become a people themselves. So how do they get along, what are the rules to live by. The rules come out of their history and experience, and their understanding of the one Great God who delivered them from Egypt. But it is more than that — how can we sustain and protect ourselves, how can we preserve our identity as a people and not get assimilated into the rest of the people around us. How do we remember who we are, and keep alive our story and our relationship to this one true God. Well that is what the law — Sinai and Deuteronomy — are for.

There was also a sense of community responsibility we don't have any more, at least not in the urban world. At times it seems like God is quite unfair and arbitrary in the Old Testament, but care of the neighborhood meant being aware of how your behaviors affected those around you. And if wrongdoing was tolerated within the community, if the community did not ensure obedience, then the whole community suffered. It is still true today, but we are so detached, so involved in protecting our individualism that we don't even notice it much anymore.

Gerhard von Rad, an earlier 20th century theologian who greatly influenced Bruggeman, claimed that God's purpose through the law was to establish a fellowship among his people in accordance with his will. And von Rad notes that in the Old Testament the law is not a heavy burden, but it was received with passion and gratefulness by the people. Indeed the immediately preceding verses say — "Surely this

commandment is not too hard for you, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

Bruggeman emphasizes an important point about Deuteronomy. The Sinai narratives are an older tradition within the actual history of the Hebrew people. According to the narrative, 40 years separates Sinai and the gathering on the east bank of the Jordan. In fact the two traditions represented by Sinai, with its priestly emphasis, and Deuteronomy, is likely a lot more than that. Deuteronomy represents the continuing development of Hebrew understanding. For them the law was not fixed, but fluid, changing times and changing circumstances required an evolving interpretation of how to apply the laws to the life of community, which is why there is both repetition, modification and new ideas in Deuteronomy. Even 700 years before Christ, the Hebrews understood Scripture as dynamic, not static. And their relationship to God was also dynamic.

Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to continue to study and probe the scripture, to struggle to apply the principles of love and grace found therein in light of the knowledge and understanding of our own time. Including, as we have done in the United Church, placing certain passages in Leviticus and elsewhere in its proper place and context, and freeing ourselves from a destructive literalism that marginalizes faithful people.

It feels these days like we in the mainline denominations are in the wilderness again, in exile in Babylon. We are declining in numbers and getting older. We inherited a model of neighborhood churches and it may not serve us as well in the future, yet it may in fact be a far more sustainable model than the big box churches with the huge parking lots. Most of our buildings are aging and in need of substantial investment, yet as a church we are cutting funding to our theological schools and community ministries. We have serious challenges to face, serious decisions to make. One is left to wonder if false gods have seduced us. Are they the gods of the culture around us?

We still live with blessings and curses. Yet here we are, still here. We still have the promises and we still can have the blessings. But what does God require of us today. Is it better marketing, slick branding campaigns, more church parking, better technology? Perhaps. I know that the church has always known how to appropriate new opportunities for communication and for worship as means to further gospel. Ironically, although we are so progressive in so many ways, the United Church can be a very conservative church on Sunday morning.

But what God wants, the road to the blessings, is for us to worship one God, the true God. As you know, I am not talking about Baal and the gods of the Canaanites. I am talking about the gods of SUV's and the shopping mall, the gods of wealth, power, and prestige, including the prestige that we once held as church, the biggest, richest, most influential Protestant denomination in the country. When the paradigms shift, when the culture shifts, those who were most successful under the old paradigm are often the

slowest to adapt. Fail to articulate a faith that is relevant to a changing world and your churches close.

So why would I give up a successful career to become a United Church Minister. Because I believe that one of the things the world needs now most of all is, amazingly enough, a revitalized and reinvigorated United Church of Canada. The world desperately needs churches like ours to offer a faith that is based in the redeeming power of God's love, the pursuit of justice for all, and care of creation.

We have a network of neighborhood churches, but even the ancient Hebrews knew that neighbourhood was a constantly changing reality, much more complex than just streets, houses and other buildings. How do we be a Christian presence? There may be a variety of new answers to that question.

The Old Testament tells how the Hebrew people continually turned away from God, but then continually turned back, and God's love was still there. The blessings and the call are as valid today as they were 2700 years ago. But you and I have a whole new way of relating to them. That way is the way revealed to us today and everyday in the power of the risen Christ, in the grace-filled presence of the Holy Spirit. Dunbar Heights faces choices, our whole church faces hard choices, but there is no reason to fear. We can dare to dream, dare to build, dare to risk, if we stand together as people of faith and choose life.

Amen