

# *At the Edge of the Promised Land*

## **Cycle # 1 – Session #7**

### **At the Edge of the Promised Land**

**Text:** Deuteronomy 8, Deut. 10:12-22

## **Gathering**

### **Opening Worship**

**Light a candle** – This time you may want to light the single candle or once again you may want to light a candle for each of the persons in your group as a reminder of God who is in your presence and will also be with you during the time between now and when you gather again. *Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.*

**Song:** Bless Now, O God, the Journey -- #489 Chalice Hymnal

### **Litany**

*This is the place and this is the time;  
Here and now God waits to break into our experience*

***To change our minds, to change our lives, to change our ways;***

*To make us see the world and the whole of life in a new light;*

***To fill us with hope, joy, and certainty for the future.***

*This is the place, as are all places; this is the time as are all times.*

***Here and now let us praise God.***

**Worship Book, World Council of Churches, 1987**

**Welcome One Another.** Over these 7 weeks we have been in Egypt and the Wilderness and now stand looking at the road ahead. Share briefly with one another, one thing you have discovered in these weeks together, one joy, and one concern you have for what lies ahead.

## Cycle #1 – Session #7

### Scripture

Deuteronomy 8, Deut. 10:12-22

<sup>1</sup>This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. <sup>2</sup>Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. <sup>3</sup>He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. <sup>4</sup>The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. <sup>5</sup>Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so, the LORD your God disciplines you. <sup>6</sup>Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. <sup>7</sup>For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, <sup>8</sup>a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, <sup>9</sup>a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. <sup>10</sup>You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

<sup>11</sup> Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

<sup>12</sup>When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, <sup>13</sup>and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, <sup>14</sup>then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, <sup>15</sup>who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock; <sup>16</sup>and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. <sup>17</sup>Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' <sup>18</sup>But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. <sup>19</sup>If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them; I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.

<sup>20</sup>Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

<sup>12</sup> So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>13</sup>and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. <sup>14</sup>Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, <sup>15</sup>yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. <sup>16</sup>Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. <sup>17</sup>For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial

and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup>who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. <sup>19</sup>You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. <sup>20</sup>You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. <sup>21</sup>He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. <sup>22</sup>Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

## Dwelling in Scripture

- 1<sup>st</sup> reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.  
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

## Behind the Text

If you enjoy a mystery, you'll enjoy this second trip going further behind the book of the second law, Deuteronomy. Since it was written over a long period of time, perhaps a hundred years, and pointed not only back to the Exodus but to the people of a much later time, it is not as simple as it might appear on the surface. This complexity and depth over the centuries are perhaps part of why it had become so embedded in the culture and was a part of every Hebrew child's education. That Jesus knew Deuteronomy well isn't surprising. When you begin to read the text for this session, you may find you actually want to read more than appears in this particular session. You may also begin to hear in its pages, words and attitudes which will seem unusually familiar – shades of Micah, shades of Jesus and even in Paul's writing.

Deuteronomy, this fifth book of what has been translated as law, might better be translated as the book of instruction. It isn't just about a bunch of rules which is how we usually think about the word 'rule.' It is much more about how the people are to conduct themselves and what their relationship to God is to be and what God will do for them if they fulfill their side of the covenant. Clearly Moses is at the heart of the book and the passage. What we are hearing in this chapter is part of a much longer sermon which is being preached to the people on the eve of their entrance into the Promised Land. Since Moses wasn't going with them, it carries the feeling of being a farewell address as he reminds them of the way they have come and the promise for the future.

Like many great books it contains multiple layers. In this case those layers not only connect it to the past and the Exodus event, but provide a connection for people long centuries later. The best guess about when the book was written appears to be about 500 years after the Exodus. I suspect like many events, looking back makes that episode of their history better than it actually was.

After the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land the lives of this nomadic people had changed drastically. They lived in towns and villages, no longer dependent upon the abundance of the wilderness for food and water. As you read various accounts of their history, and moving into the Promised Land, it's clear people who were already living there hadn't welcomed them with open arms. Over time they had developed structures like the other nations, loosely connected tribal groups led by judges like Samuel, gave way to kings. King David, and his son, Solomon, were seen in later years as the epitome of what kings should be. If you read their stories, it's pretty clear they weren't all that they might have been, but David loved God, and Solomon who built the temple was seen as walking in God's way. As with many Golden Eras, their reigns were not nearly as good as remembered, or imagined.

After Solomon's death, the seeds of division caused the Kingdom to be divided into two, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century (450-500 years after the time of the Exodus) Israel fell to Assyria. Judah survived, but was crippled, and forced to submit to Assyria's painful, and humiliating demands. This continued until the Assyrians became preoccupied with Babylon as it rose to power. During the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Josiah, the boy king, entered the picture. The story is told that during the temple renovation, which took place in his reign, a copy of the Law of Moses was found. It's possible it was part of what is in the book of Deuteronomy, but there are hints in the book of events which took place long after Josiah. It's also possible, the finding of the Law, and the restoration of the temple were the result, rather than the cause, of reform which was occurring during Josiah's reign. It was a time of hope that the kingdom of David would be restored. However the hope was as short lived as King Josiah who died in battle.

After him things seem to have mostly continued downhill. By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the old kingdom of Israel was in ruins. The temple had been destroyed. The future seemed very uncertain. While the cause of the uncertainty was different, the future seemed not unlike the situation the Israelites had faced on the edge of the Promised Land. No one knew for sure what lay ahead. In this new time of crisis, the nation had been defeated and the people were in danger of losing their sense of nationhood which had begun with a covenant at Mount Horeb (Sinai). Their commitment to the LORD as God was wavering. Had they been defeated because God was not as powerful as they had believed? If God wasn't all that powerful, would they be better off turning to their old ways and other gods? With all the uncertainty about how to prepare for what is clearly going to be a difficult time, why continue to be faithful to God? In the time of Exile, many were taken to Babylon, many, particularly the old, the young; those who were weaker had been left behind. There was a dearth of leadership among those left behind. And the leaders, who were taken, had lost their power.

Deuteronomy seems to be a pivotal book, standing between what was and what will be. It reviews the past and challenges the people to a renewal of their commitment and loyalty while encouraging them to look forward to a new day, a day which will belong to the faithful. Moses' voice is heard reminding and affirming Israel's *chosenness* long before they became slaves in Egypt, escaped bondage, spent long lean years in the wilderness, entered the land promised to their ancestors or had kings. It is important they hear.... *from the beginning God had chosen them.*

Deuteronomy is the most quoted book in the New Testament and was certainly highly influential in the shaping of the early Christian faith. Reading through its pages one hears many words and attitudes which appeared in the teachings of Jesus and the early church.... *Love the Lord your God. Welcome the stranger.* It offers glimpses of the inwardness of faith with an emphasis on attitude, and action not just for action's sake, but for God's sake, obedience which grows out of the heart's searching and self examination. Many of the conflicts Jesus had with the Pharisees and Saducees seem to have been over these very things.

For us as Disciples and Christians at the beginning of this 21<sup>st</sup> century we find ourselves in a world surrounded by great uncertainty. Our nation has been involved in conflict somewhere in the world for the past century. Where to turn? Where are we going and how do we get there? We long for a new day. Many find themselves wondering where God is and if in fact God is still in our midst. In such a world we're not unlike the Israelites who found themselves uncertain about the future as they looked at their nation in ruins or stood on the edge of the Promised Land facing the unknown.

As we explore the connection between these ancient texts and transformation at the beginning of this twenty first century, it's worth going back and looking again at this important document and how God's people were shaped by God, events, and leaders who sought to be faithful to God.

### **Observation**

In some ways it may seem odd to use these two passages of scripture which emphasize remembering, behavior and attitude as part of the journey of transformation. However, I believe, they have a lot to say to us, if we stop and dig a little below the surface. Clearly the community to which these words were addressed was a community in need of transformation. They were in crisis and they were in danger of losing themselves. How they responded would determine their future.

### **Consider**

When individuals or communities are in crisis what are the most common responses? If you can think of a particular time in your own life or in the life of your congregation consider how you responded.

### **Observation**

Israel's future seems to hinge primarily on two things, – their behavior in response to God's action and their remembering the important lessons of their past. *Walking in God's ways* appears to refer only to the Ten Commandments and not a lot of highly detailed rules which developed as the community became more structured and eventually more settled. If you remember the commandments are divided roughly into two kinds. The first four are about the nature of their relationship to God, i.e. no idols, disrespect for God and God's ways, and remembering the Sabbath. The rest are about how they are to treat other people (Exodus 20: 1-17).

### **Consider**

Jesus said the most important commandment is "love the Lord your God with your whole being" and the second is "love your neighbor as yourself" which seems a pretty good summary of the ten commandments. Where do you see in your own life or in the life of your congregation, these commandments made visible?

## Observation

Notice the things God's people are to remember after the commandments.

Lessons from the wilderness years:

- ▶ Humility – recognize dependence upon God
- ▶ Manna – bread which is more than bread and symbolized God's power and abundance. In the scrub brush of the wilderness the people discovered an edible substance secreted by insects which would feed them.
- ▶ In that they saw God's action.
- ▶ The difficulty of life in the wilderness shaped them as a people.

## Consider

Think about your own life. What are the experiences and times which have most shaped who you are? Were they the easy or difficult times? What about your congregation? What are the stories you have heard?

## Observation

This passage seems to be visible in the account of the temptations of Jesus as told in Luke. In fact the words, "*one does not live by bread alone*," are among those spoken in Luke 4. The other key teachings also show up, "worship the Lord your God and serve only him", and a third, "don't put your Lord God to the test."

## Consider

Consider that phrase, "*one does not live by bread alone*." What feeds you? How do you experience the abundance of God in your life, in your life as the member of a congregation?

## Observation

Within the Promised Land, prosperity beyond the dreams of the people used to living in the scarcity of the wilderness becomes possible. While in the wilderness people had enough, the options were certainly very limited. They lived mostly off the land, by their flocks, had a limited diet, and at best, life was hard. In the Promised land they will experience variety, richness and abundance. Food – wheat, barley, figs, pomegranates, olives, honey – which were varied and luxurious when viewed from the wilderness. At the same time, this wealth may tempt the people to forget God and make them forget that underneath this apparent abundance, all that they have and are comes ultimately from God.

## Consider

Where does your own life and experience intersect with this or does it? How do you see this intersecting with what is going on all around us? What might people do differently if they began to see God as the source of our abundance?

## **Observation**

One of the key concepts in this passage is that of covenant. There is a covenant between God and the people of Israel. That covenant goes back to the beginning of the story. It was made first with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and then renewed in the wilderness. There are two sides of this covenant. If the people are faithful and “walk in God’s ways”, they will experience security, prosperity and survival in the land. If they do not remember the lessons of the past and do not live the messages, their nation may be destroyed.

## **Consider**

What does covenant mean to you? Does the church have a covenant with God? If the writer of Deuteronomy were speaking to you what would be his reminder to you? What must you not forget? How does your behavior match what is called for in this passage? What are the dangers around the church today that might cause us to break the covenant?

## **Activity (Optional)**

Experiment with writing a covenant for your congregation and the people in it. What would it be important to remember about your past, about God, about your responsibility to God and where God meets you? Writing such a covenant is not an easy or quick activity, but even beginning will be worthwhile, since it will require you to look seriously at your relationship with God as well as with one another.

## **Practicing the Presence**

- 1) This session marks the end of the first cycle. Spend some time this week reflecting on your journey thus far. If you have made a covenant to continue to be in prayer with others of the group, find a way to do that deliberately. Prayer helps can be useful such as a picture of the group or some other reminder.
- 2) Look back over these past weeks. Have you discovered anything new about God, yourself, your congregation? What, if anything, do you see yourself changing? Where is God working in your life?
- 3) If you wish to continue the practice of reading and reflecting on scripture you may wish to go back to some of the scriptures used throughout this first cycle of our studies and read them again, noticing what they may be saying to you. Or you may have heard a reference to another scripture during these weeks with which you would like to spend more time. This will be a good opportunity to do this.

## **Suggested Reading Pattern**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

## Closing Worship

### Meditation

The Israelites had come a long way over 40 years. Some of the lessons they probably began to hear at the beginning had only gradually soaked in. Yet over and over the story has been that of transformation. God transformed no-thingness into a universe and a world filled with plants, animals, people, all that we need to live and gave us a home. The story has been one of the transformations of individuals and of a people. The people who had thought of themselves only as Hebrews had become the Israelites and now they are standing on the edge of the future. On the way they had had to learn to trust God’s presence was not only with them, but would guide them, provide for them abundantly, and protect them as they journeyed. They had had to leave not only the physical bonds of Egypt behind, they had to let go of the mental bonds of slavery which lasted well beyond their entrance into the wilderness. The people who had been in Exile had had to learn many of the same lessons and must have felt like they too were wandering in the wilderness as they discovered God with them even in that distant place, Among the most important lessons were those that God had told them to carve in their hearts, wear on their bodies, place on the door to their home, teach to their children. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart* As a group it is my hope you have come a long way in the weeks you have shared this journey with one another.

What is one thing you will carry with you as you continue your journey of transformation?

**Prayer –** Notice who is on your right and who is on your left. Between now and the next time you will meet, hold these persons in your prayers. During this time mention one thing for which you give thanks

**Unison - Loving God, you have called us and we have gathered in your Son’s name. We are on a journey, a journey along the Good News road which stretches further back than we can see and will continue long after we are gone. Teach us the lessons we need to live and be at home with as we seek to live faithful lives here and now. We know you provide**

**abundantly for us and go with us each day. Guide us into the future to which you are calling us. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray.**

**Amen**

**Blessing** – Carry the good news of God’s love in your heart  
Make it visible each day as you love one another and reach out to your neighbors. Know that God is with you in all times and all circumstances. Go in peace.

**Song** (optional) Lo I Am With You - #430 Chalice Hymnal