

“God’s Abundance”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, October 11, 2020

Thanksgiving Sunday – Deuteronomy 8

In our passage today from Deuteronomy 8, I love the richness of the detail of what God is giving to the people. “A land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills. A land of wheat and barley. A land of vines and fig trees and pomegranates. A land of olive trees and honey. A land with stones of iron and hills of copper. A land where you will lack nothing.”

I know too that the same land written here is the same land that surrounds me. Flowing streams, fields of wheat, fruit trees, and honey. Copper in the hills and minerals in the ground. A land where I will lack nothing. Except that today, there is nothing simple about my relationship with the land that surrounds me. For these gifts of the land are mired in controversy, misuse and abuse, overrun by Industry and trade interests, torn apart for profit. Copper hills and iron rock have been exploited by industry, the rights of indigenous peoples have been shoved aside, here in Canada and worldwide. Flowing streams and underground waters are filled with pollutants and industrial waste. Even honey is threatened by certain pesticides sprayed on crops, killing the honey bees. When I place the bible’s idyllic picture of the simple gifts of the land given by God next to what I see in my world, I see no correlation between then and now.

At one time, the land was revered. There was no line between what was sacred and what was secular. All things were of and from God, including all material things. Theologian Andrew Root points out how in earlier times the sacred and the secular were intertwined – there was no distinction between them, they were in essence, one. Writing about the church in the twelfth century, he says, “if the medieval priests had a top-ten list of frustrations, “refusal to swallow the host” would be on it. People were sneaking the body of Christ out of the church to feed to their sick cows ... The first Edwardian Prayer Book accordingly insisted that the bread should be placed by the officiating minister in the communicant’s mouth, because in past times people had often carried the sacrament away.”¹

Andrew Root captures the trust people carried that all things were of and from God. Contrast that to today. Andrew writes, “People are willing to have children baptized but are pretty sure that tap water has no power (or force) to bring life out of death. Willing to happily take the bread and wine, hearing the words “This body broken for you,” they also know that it is store bought.”²

Do we no longer see the sacred in the secular, in things like the sacramental bread and water? We did at one point. Here is a communion hymn from nearly 200 years ago, that we sang as we held the communion bread in our hand: “Here O my Lord, I see you face to face; here would I touch and handle things unseen, here grasp with firmer hand eternal grace, and all my

¹ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 34-35.

² Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 31.

weariness upon you lean.”³ How far gone today is our ability to see, to taste, to touch, to find, the sacred in the secular?

In our Deuteronomy passage, Moses says to the people, “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God ... when you have eaten your fill and built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself ... do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” “*My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.*”

In a note in my Jewish Study Bible, it says of this passage, “Moses warns the people that success in Canaan will tempt them to forget the wilderness lesson of complete dependence upon God.”⁴ The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the promised land. During this time, the people were completely dependent on God for food – and God provided manna at daybreak, and quails at night, sustaining the people each and every day for forty years without fail.

I read in Deuteronomy about the abundance of God’s gifts to the people, in the streams, in the fields, in the orchards and the minerals in the ground, and I hear God saying, I am giving you *all of this*. But I hear my culture shouting back, ‘It isn’t enough.’

The words of Moses come back to haunt me - ‘*My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.*’ But at what cost? ‘*Our power*’ takes the land, disregarding indigenous people’s rights. ‘*Our power*’ clear-cuts Amazon forests, the lungs of the earth, for profit, throwing conservation out the window. ‘*Our power*’, in its craze to make profits, pushes climate awareness to the background, polluting water and air that is affecting *all* life that lives on the Earth. There is no longer a relationship between God and the land in the minds of the people. There is no longer the ability to understand Deuteronomy’s account of the running streams, fields of grain, and copper hills in the way it was offered. Because we have forgotten the relationship.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister, puts her finger on the issue. “Dependence on God is a value long lost. Yet ‘enoughness’ and dependence on God may be what is lacking in a society where consumerism and accumulation have become the root diseases of a world in which everything is not enough and nothing satisfies.”⁵

It is not by my power that I succeed, but by God’s power. For God’s power is the power of life. It is the power of creation. It is the power we glimpse in a new born baby’s arrival and cry. It is the power we trust in when our loved one dies, it is the power we trust in when we die, that we will live again in new life in Christ.

We are fools to think we have any power.

³ “Here, O My Lord”, VU 459 Verse 1.

⁴ *The Jewish Study Bible, Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 365.

⁵ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2010), 235.

And so, we gather together today to give thanks for the flowing streams, the fields of grain, the olive trees, the honey, and the copper hill. And in all these things, we see God's hand, not ours. We see God's power, not ours.

In a hymn we traditionally sing on Thanksgiving Sunday, 'We Plough the Fields and Scatter', I close with its words of gratitude,

"All good gifts around us
are sent from heaven above;
we thank you, God, O holy God,
for all your love."⁶

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Chorus from VU 520 We Plough the Fields