



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Promised Land

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

For the last few weeks we have been looking at the life of Moses and today we draw that series to a close with a passage from the end of Deuteronomy that describes Moses' last moments, when he finally sees The Promised Land.

The Promised Land. It is a phrase that evokes feelings of hope in us. The Promised Land suggests something better is ahead. We are moving toward a new thing and that new thing will be good. The Promised Land has many names, The Land of Milk and Honey, Canaan, The Land of Plenty, Abraham's Bosom, The Kingdom of God, Scotland!

OK, joking but it is true that we may all have something different spring to mind when we hear the term Promised Land. For many of your ancestors, leaving their country to come to America, this land was their Promised Land.

The concept of Promised Land is still at the center of the Israel Palestine conflict.

The Promised Land imagery is prevalent in African American spirituals where the Promised Land was an escape from slavery and persecution, even if that Promised Land was found in death, it is the hope of something better.

Martin Luther King's Mountaintop speech made to sanitation workers in Memphis, the night before he was killed, evokes Moses as MLK said,

"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 you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So, 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."

The hope for something better.

The idea of Promised Land shows up again and again in popular culture, it is an idea that has not gone away. There have been multiple books, movies, TV Shows and songs using the title The Promised Land. Some of you may be thinking of a show or song or book as I have been talking.

My mind went straight to Chuck Berry and his wonderful song about leaving home in Norfolk Virginia, with California on his mind. Bruce Springsteen might disagree, but I think it's the best Promised Land song.

The hope of The Promised Land means something to us still today. It is an important concept that has resonated with people since the time of Abraham when God first promised His people such a place. The need for hope continues though the centuries.

I remember attending a conference as a young man called Glimpses of Glory where the theme was those little moments when God gives us just a glimpse of His Kingdom, the wonderful things to come, and perhaps how things could be now. Those are moments when you feel so close to God that your

faith is reinvigorated. You see a glimpse of the Kingdom and you receive hope for better things to come. We even call those moments mountain top experiences.

So, we come to Deuteronomy 34 and the final scenes in the life of Moses. The great irony of his life after all he has done, all the leadership he has shown, is that he is allowed by God to climb to the mountaintop and see The Promised Land, but he is not allowed to actually lead the people in.

Now it makes no difference to the story, but I have never liked that fact. Surely of all the people who should enter The Promised land, Moses should be in front of the line.

The reason Moses does not enter is found in Numbers Chapter 20, where we read that the people have stopped at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. There is no water, and the people are unhappy. They complain to Moses and Aaron. *“Why have you brought us out of Egypt to this wretched place.”*

We read that, *“Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. 7 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 8 Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus, you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus, you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.”*

However, for some reason, that is not what Moses does.

Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. 10 Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” 11 Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. 12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

Moses words imply that he and Aaron are the ones bringing the water from the rock as he strikes it with a rock, (which he had done before in Exodus 17,) instead of following and trusting God’s instruction to speak to the rock.

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses death is foretold and here in chapter 34 it is realized.

As much as it seems harsh to me, Moses seems to accept it. He denied God’s holiness, and this is the result.

Perhaps what is just a puzzling to me is that Deuteronomy ends here. I feel like there should be one more chapter showing the entry into The Promised Land. I know the next book in the Old Testament, Joshua continues the story, but the end of Deuteronomy isn’t just the end of Deuteronomy, it is the end of the written Torah, the 5 books of Moses. These holy books, which may have been one book to begin with, of Judaism with no victorious entry into Canaan. There is no real resolution. The Torah ends with the death of Moses and the people still outside the Promised Land. The end of the book feels unresolved. It does seem a bit odd. They are so close.

Perhaps the thing I hear most often on a youth summer trip when we are in the van, is, “Are we there yet?”

You have probably all heard that at some point in your life. You may have said it a time or two in your life. Might even be as you feel a sermon is going a bit long!

Are we there yet? I wonder if the people of Israel asked Moses or Aaron that question. I am sure they did. Hey Moses, we’ve been in this dessert a long time. Are we there yet?

Well we get to the end of Moses’ life and the answer to that question is still, “No we are not quite there yet.” They are almost there, they can taste it they are so close, but they are not there yet.

If the Written Torah is the first section of scripture, the second section would be the rest of the Old Testament which also seems to end unresolved. There is promise of a Messiah, but that Messiah has not come yet, they are waiting.

Are we there yet? No, we are not.

Then the third part would be the New Testament. There is also a certain unresolved nature to how that ends in Revelation with the promise of Jesus coming again soon, but not yet.

Are we there yet? No, not yet. But we have seen the Promised land.

I suspect the end of Deuteronomy, God’s people being close to the Promised Land but not quite there yet is not by accident.

Perhaps it is a true to our experience.

Jesus speaks much of the Kingdom of God. That is what we aim for, that is our Promised Land. I mentioned earlier those glimpses of glory, glimpses of the Kingdom we may experience. They provide us a sense of where we are going. What we are aiming for. But we are not there yet. But those glimpses let us know it will be worth the wait, we know what it will be like.

Those glimpses may come in a special moment in worship, a beautiful piece of music played, they may come as you experience the beauty of creation, they may come in a quiet moment of prayer when it feels like God walked into the room. It may come when in a world full of anger, you see the care and love one person may have for another, in a world full of selfishness you experience a wonderful act of service. In the love that you experience with the folks sitting around you in this community.

We have been to the mountain top. We have seen the promised land! But are we there yet? No, not yet.

Those moments, those glimpses may not come around every day, they may not even be common, but when we get a glimpse of The Promised Land, it does indeed provide hope. Those are moments when

you think, THIS is what it is all about, when you wish you could bottle it and hold onto the love and grace of that moment because that is a glimpse of glory, we see the Promised Land. Those moments are indeed a gift to hold on to.

Some of you know I'm a bit of a U2 fan. Many moons ago they put out a song, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For, which included these lyrics,

*"I believe in the Kingdom Come. Then all the colors will bleed into one. Bleed into one
But yes, I'm still running. You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame, of my shame. You know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."*

They took flak from some in the church for those words, I mean who could experience those things of Christ and then say, I still haven't found what I'm looking for? Isn't Christ enough.

But I think most of us may relate to those lyrics. They had seen the Promised Land, but they were not there yet. As long as this world still has hate and murder and war and greed and injustice and poverty and famine, when it should be governed by love and grace then we haven't found what we're looking for, we have seen The Promised Land, but we are not there yet.

I think U2 may have understood the teaching of Paul when he writes to the Philippians,
"I want to know Christ[f] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; [g] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved,[h] I do not consider that I have made it my own;[i] but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly[j] call of God in Christ Jesus."

That is where we are, it is where I am. When it feels like we have seen the Promised Land, but we are just not there, when it feels like we know how this world could be, but we are not there yet, we know Jesus' love and grace, we have vision for the kingdom of God, but we look around and it feels like we still haven't found what we're looking for.

Remember what Paul says, *Christ Jesus has made me his own*. So, friends press on toward that goal of the kingdom of God. Jesus has shown us the Promised Land, he has shown us how it could be. So, press on with grace and compassion and selflessness and most importantly with LOVE to change your world. And your world is your family, your friendships, your relationships with those who may not be considered friends, your school, your workplace, your city, your country, your church. And we press on together with and not against each other and we press on toward that goal with Jesus, to whom we pray with assurance, "Thy Kingdom Come!"