

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
June 14, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Take these words to heart

—Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28

“Daddy, where is grandpa. Where did he go?”

“Well...”

“And daddy, where are all my friends’ grandpas? Where did they all go?”

“Well, son, I have to tell you a story. A sad story, but a true story.”

“You see, many, many years ago God came to our forefather Abraham and promised him great things. God told Abraham he would make him into a great nation. God said he would bless all peoples through Abraham. And God told Abraham he would someday give his descendants the land of Canaan. God promised Abraham these things, and then God promised Abraham’s son Isaac these things, and then God promised Isaac’s son Jacob these things. Jacob had twelve sons, and his twelve sons had sons and daughters, and the sons and daughters had sons and daughters, and over many, many years in Egypt, all these children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren became a great nation, just like God said would happen. And that’s who we are: the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people of Israel.

“When God’s time was right, he wanted to bring our people to the land of Canaan. But our people were slaves in Egypt, and Pharaoh the king of Egypt was very, very bad to our people. Pharaoh made our work really hard. Pharaoh even wanted to kill our baby boys. Our people cried out to God for help, and God listened. God sent Moses to set us free. Pharaoh said, ‘No, I will not let you people go!’ So God sent plagues on Egypt and ruined the land of Egypt with signs and wonders: frogs, gnats, and flies, hail, disease, and darkness. And the night God killed all the firstborn sons in Egypt, which was the night Moses led our people out. But Pharaoh chased after our people with a mighty army of soldiers, horses, and chariots, and Pharaoh trapped our people up against the shore of the Red Sea. You know what God did next?”

“What, daddy, what did God do?”

“God opened a path through the sea. He drove the waters back, and he made a road right through the middle of the sea. All our people crossed over on dry land. Pharaoh’s army tried to catch our people, but God told Moses to wave his staff over the sea. The waters crashed back together, and all the army of Egypt drowned and died in the sea. God redeemed us. God freed us from slavery in Egypt to bring us to a new life in the land he promised.

“On the way from Egypt to Canaan, God led us through a wide desert that was very dry. There was nothing to drink. There was nothing to eat. So God did more signs and wonders. He sent manna, “bread from heaven” God called it, to give us something to eat. He made water come out of rock to give us something to drink. Moses led our people to a mountain called Mount Sinai. God came down to Mount Sinai with fire and smoke and thunder and lightning. God said, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’ And God said, ‘You shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that it may go well with you and you may live long in the land that God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.’ God made us his people, and God gave us these commandments.

“Now, son, here’s where the story gets sad. God brought us to the edge of the land of Canaan, the land he promised us. He told us to go in and make it ours. He was ready to lead us in so we could live there. But our fathers thought the people in the land were too big and too strong. Our fathers were terrified and afraid. They said it would be better to die in the desert than to try to take the land of Canaan. They wanted to get rid of Moses, get a new leader, and go back to Egypt. They did not trust God. They rebelled against God and told God, ‘No! We are not going in.’ So God got angry at them. God said none of those men would live in the Promised Land. And they never did. Our people wandered from place to place in the desert for forty years, and all those men died. That’s what happened to grandpa. That’s what happened to your friends’ grandpas. They are not here anymore. They all died, just like God said. Because that is what happens when people do not listen to God. That’s what happens when people do not take God’s words to heart.”

Deuteronomy chapter 11: *Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth...See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you*

today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.

How can any generation, how can any nation on earth find blessing if it does not take God's words to heart? Israel from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus was a one-of-a-kind nation. That was a nation God chose for himself, a people through whom all peoples would be blessed as the world's Savior, Jesus Christ, was born from them. No nation is like that today. Not the modern state of Israel. Not the United States. Not any other state, nation, or land under God's blue sky. But all the people and all the nations are still in the hands of God.

God's unchanging commands apply to all generations and all nations on earth, whether they acknowledge it or not. How can a nation find blessing if it does not take God's words to heart? Sure, a human constitution secures freedom of religion for a people, so that in effect those people can believe in whoever or whatever they want, practice their religion in whatever ways they are taught, or for that matter deny there's a god and reject religion altogether if they so desire. But let me ask you: Does Jesus Christ, who bought people with his blood, take pleasure in sharing the hearts of people with Buddha and Allah and Krishna? Does Jesus Christ, who came to destroy the devil's work, desire to coexist with paganism and Satanism? When churches in the land exchange their soul for success and standing and security in this life, who is left to call people to repentance for doing the same thing? If pastors and teachers add to or subtract from the words of God, whether by ignorance or by intention, and then lazily claim, "Well, it's all a matter of interpretation anyway," who is left to speak a clear message that afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted? From one man God made every ethnicity, every nation. God paired the first man with one woman, united the two in marriage, and then blessed them, making them fruitful and increase in number. Does any people have the right to tell God, "No, that's not the way it is. It's not binary. People have every God-given right to form their own sexuality, their own gender, their own self-created identity"? What happens to morality when couples will not make public promises to each other? What happens to basic decency when it's weird if you don't live together before getting married, if you ever get around to getting married at all? What about when couples do make public promises, but do not keep the vows they made? What happens when children have no consistent mother or father, or children have to suffer through a divorce? What happens when couples try to solve the riddle by having the attitude, "We are dead set against having any children at all"? Is it any wonder that destroying marriage and despising family cause problems that are not solved by money and medication? "You shall not murder," God says. But when a nation determines that it's a right to terminate a child growing in the womb, even Christians shrug it off with, "Well, I guess you can't legislate morality." Well, okay, granted. You can't make anyone do anything for the right reason by force of law. But shouldn't somebody be doing something throughout the land to legally restrain the murder of the most vulnerable people there are? Does all the blood spilled from the womb to the streets and glorified on the screen cry out to God for blessing? If people are making money hand over fist, is it right for them to pay a pittance into the palm of the people working for them? If people are unwilling to work, should they eat, much less be allowed to beg and steal from those who do work? When a people's favorite Bible passage, if it knows a passage at all, is "Judge not lest ye be judged," then why is it that the general practice becomes to judge harshly and prematurely all the things you shouldn't and refuse to judge with care the things you should? How can any nation find blessing if it does not take God's words to heart? All that's left is a curse.

The last three months in our nation have been weird. Maybe you have wondered, "What should I be taking out of all this? What should I at this time be taking to heart?" There's a message for us all in Deuteronomy. This is a time of discipline from God, just like any difficult time is a discipline from God. He can halt life whenever he wants, just like he can start life whenever he wants. He can make a whole generation die in the desert and start over with a new generation. He can dismantle a nation so it never returns. He can make a nation rise from the ashes and prosper again for a time. But in the end, he is going to bring all life on earth to a screeching halt, and coronaviruses and civil unrest and cash flow will be the least of mankind's worries. God is going to make final judgment. In front of all generations and all nations that ever existed, in front of every individual who ever lived, will be one of two things: an everlasting blessing or an everlasting curse.

For anyone who is willing to listen, now is a time to take God's words to heart. "*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds,*" God says. Judge yourself according to God's commandments. Uncover for yourself the sin within you, everything about you that deserves to have you cursed. Acknowledge you have hidden faults that you do not even see. And confess your sin to God, seeking only his mercy and grace. "*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds,*" God says. Seek the heart's reassurance and the peace of mind that only come from Jesus Christ. By the mercy of God, Christ was put on a cross and cursed for your sin and mine, too. He redeemed you. He freed you from slavery to sin and death. The blessing promised to Abraham, which is essentially the forgiveness of sins and everlasting blessing through Jesus Christ, is yours by faith in Christ. "*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds,*" God says. Live as a believer in Christ. Put into practice his commands to love him and to love others as you love yourself, to love others as Christ has loved you and as he loves them. Teach God's words to your children and your grandchildren. Talk about them at home, and talk about them when you are out and about with people in this land. It's time for all of us to take all God's words to heart. Amen.