

Deuteronomy 5:1-10
"The 3001st Generation"

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We are in the book of Deuteronomy this morning, which means we are dealing in do-overs and second chances. Anytime you're reading Deuteronomy, this is what you're into, because Deuteronomy literally is a story about do-overs and second chances. (Just a side note, don't you think it's great to come to church and discover that what's being handed out today is do-overs and second chances. I think that's great.) But back to Deuteronomy. From deuteron, meaning second, and nomos, meaning law. Deuteronomy is the story of Moses giving the law of God to the Israelites for the second time. Of course, this begs the question: what happened to the law the first time? Good question.

The first-time God gave the law to the Israelites was in the book of Exodus. In Exodus, the whole Israelite family is enslaved under Pharaoh in Egypt. It's been this way for so many generations that no slave child knows a grandparent or great-parent who wasn't a slave. All day long parent and child work alongside each other making bricks without straw. At night, mothers and fathers tell bedtime stories about a world their children can only imagine, because they've never seen it. A world in which God is the only lawmaker and the only law is love and freedom working towards justice for all. "When? When will that be? For we are crying out even now. Does God not hear?" the children want to know.

Then one day, they discover that the God who has long been silent, has also long been listening. "I have heard the cries of my people in bondage," God tells Moses. "Now go and get them out."

What happens next is as surprising as it is predictable. Free from bondage and miles away from Egypt, the Israelites start to wish they could go back to Egypt. This is the thing about freedom. It's not free. It turns out the old cliché is true. Except what is true is that freedom comes at a cost not only to those who give their lives for it, but also to those whose lives freedom becomes.

I've never been an addict to alcohol or drugs, but I've heard recovering alcoholics say that recovery is just that. It's recovery. You're never really cured. You never stop thinking of yourself as an alcoholic or a druggie. You're always recovering. And the fact

that you know it might take only one sip or one hit to make you an addict again, is part of what makes it this way. The difference however, between an addict and a recovering addict, is that a recovering addict is able to take responsibility for being free. They are more awake to the pain they have caused themselves, their family, and their community, and though they are now “free,” they are not free, because they are living with this knowledge of who they were, who they’ve become, and who they could still become again. They are living with this knowledge in hand and in mind all the time.

This may be what the Israelites have forgotten now so far away from Egypt, that they are in recovery, and recovery means having to find yourself again. And when you’ve been buried under years of generational slavery, when all you’ve ever known about yourself is what you’ve been told about yourself, and what you’ve been told isn’t good, then recovery isn’t going to happen overnight, and it’s not going to happen without help.

This is why, as part of the story of Exodus, God gives to the Israelites not only a way out of Egypt but also a law, because God doesn’t just want us to be free, God wants us to be free to live with one another, and for that we need laws.

At its best, a set of laws provides for us a map of a fence line wherein we can live together. The law only works to do this, however, if we agree not to run all over each other. If we reach for mutual understanding, and practice compromise, and promote dignity and equality, and provide for those without equality, and forgive, and give each other second chances. For we have seen it time and time again what happens in countries and communities and churches that don’t forgive. Power goes to our heads, the poor and marginalized get exploited, we lose ourselves in thinking we are more important than we really are, and tyranny becomes ruler. Read the first 12 chapters of Exodus and see if this isn’t what happens to Pharaoh. Moses goes to Pharaoh and declares, “The Lord says, let my people go!” And Pharaoh responds, “Who is the Lord that I should let Israel go?” And instead of letting Israel go, Pharaoh comes down on the people even harder. I’ll show them who the lord is! Pharaoh has lost himself. Exodus records, his heart goes completely hard. He’s empty of all ability to forgive, which is tragic, because nothing can sober us up from our addiction to power and return us to ourselves more than giving grace to someone we don’t think deserves it.

Ten times Moses goes back to Pharaoh to declare, “Let my people go.” When Pharaoh can no longer stand to be challenged to his face so much that he does let the people go, they exit Egypt so quickly there’s no time to even wait for the bread to finish baking in the oven. *Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we’re free at last!* Only there’s no bread at all in the wilderness; no water; no shelter from the hot sun; no shelter from the cold night air. “Did you bring us out here only to kill us?” they point the finger at Moses. “We’d be better off back in Egypt with Pharaoh!”

This is the point in Exodus when God gives a law to Moses and the people, and God makes the first law, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. For I am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandment.”

Joyce said it to me yesterday, after looking over this reading in preparation for being Liturgist today, “Why God doesn’t sound much different from Pharaoh. What kind of God is jealous and punishes children because of their parents?”

I’m not sure I can answer that, Joyce. I will say that when I look around at churches and religion in the 21st century today, it seems to me that we’ve grown accustomed to having God the way we like it. So, there are churches where God goes around angry all the time, and the people in the church spend all their time shouting and pointing fingers at anyone who doesn’t believe and behave the way they do. Such churches look scary, but really, I think they’re the scared ones. Then there are churches where God is like a pastor whose answer to everything is to hug it out. Where you stand around holding hands and everyone is careful not to offend anyone. Such churches tell you, “You’re perfect. God loves you just the way you are.” But such churches wouldn’t last a day in recovery.

What we have is a God who says, “I love you, you are precious in my sight, and I would lay down my life for you, but if you break my law—if you take advantage of the poor, if you abuse the earth, if you don’t love your neighbor as yourself, if you let power go to your head and become slave masters yourselves—I can’t put up with that. I can’t turn a

blind eye to that. I am a jealous for the least, and there will be hell to pay if you mistreat them. But for you there will also be recovery. There will be do-overs and second chances.”

Among my favorite stories of late is *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. When the story opens, we are introduced to the Once-ler, so named by his mother who doesn't really believe he can amount to anything, but who nonetheless is going to give him one chance to try. The Once-ler sets out to make his fortune by making and selling clothes made from the leaves of Truffula Trees. No sooner does he chop down his first tree, though, and he chops down his second, and then his third. He builds a factory, and watches his business get bigger and bigger, and his family loves him. Until one day, he is interrupted by the appearance of the Lorax, a strange, small, mythical looking creature.

*“I speak for the trees, which you seem to be chopping down as fast you please.
Once-ler!” the Lorax cried with a cruffulous croak.
“Once-ler! You’re making such smogulous smoke!
My poor Swomme-Swans...why, they can’t sing a note!
No one can sing who has smog in his throat.
And so,” said the Lorax,
please pardon my cough,
they cannot live here.
So I’m sending them off.”*

And this is how the story goes. With every tree he cuts down, the Once-ler gets richer, and the animals get sicker. Then comes the inevitable. No more trees, no more work to be done. The Once-ler's family abandons him. The Lorax, who says nothing, just lifts himself by the seat of his pants and exits through a hole in the smog with the last of the animals, leaving the Once-ler to live alone in a land devastated by the greed of his own doing.

What an end. Well, you know that's not the end. Many, many years go by, when one day the Once-ler is staring out his window and sees a young child down below in his yard. The child is standing on a rock that was left behind by the Lorax, and on the rock is written the word “Unless.” The Once-ler has stared out at this rock many times without knowing what it was there for, or what the word meant. But now, seeing a child standing on top if it, he declares,

*“Why yes, now I know
Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot
nothing is going to get better.
It’s not.”*

This is a Deuteronomy story. In Exodus God gives the people the law so they might learn to care for one another as God does, but the people turn away from the law, and in so doing they turn away from God and each other. And the world is left to wonder: is that it? Is God a one-shot God? Will there be no more law, no more love? Then, many years later, comes Deuteronomy. A do-over. A second chance. Why? Just because God is someone who cares a whole awful lot. Amen.