

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY VII - RE-FORMATION
Ordinary Time - Reformation Sunday

Deuteronomy 34:1-10

A Sermon Preached by
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October 29, 2017

Liturgists – Scripture:

Our scripture reading for this morning is Deuteronomy 34:1- 11. Listen for the word of God.

Deuteronomy 34:1-10¹

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants;’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet of Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

Rev. Debra Jarvis

Which one of these statements is false?

- * Martin Luther was not a Lutheran.
- * Moses and the Israelites never made it to the Promised Land.
- * Every single person in this sanctuary is going to die.

This is trick question. Every one of those statements is true. With that is mind, I think we’d better pray. [*Silent prayer.*] So these are all true: Martin Luther was not a Lutheran. Moses and the Israelites never made it to the Promised Land. Every single person in this sanctuary is going to die.

What do they have in common? Re-formation. And this is what I mean by re-formation: this is a heavy piece of wire in the shape of a coat hanger. This is now the base for a Christmas wreath. It is still a piece of heavy wire, but it has been re-formed.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. 1989.

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It's the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and if that hadn't happened, I would not be standing up here preaching but probably sitting with you waiting for the Mass to end.

So we need to think about the Reformation today and ask how that is relevant to our lives.

The scripture this morning is about the death of Moses so we need to think about what it means to die without our dreams not being realized. And what it means to have to re-form ourselves as a group after a leader leaves or dies and we have to personally re-form ourselves after we lose a friend or a family member.

This week we have Halloween, All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day. For most of us Halloween is about costumes and candy, as Protestants we don't really celebrate All Saint's Day, but we do recognize All Soul's Day as the day on which we remember those who have died.

So the menu for today includes Moses, Martin Luther and Halloween.

Let's start with **Martin Luther**. He was a Catholic monk who didn't like what was happening in the church. Two of the things he didn't like were the selling of indulgences which meant you could be a jerk and do all sorts of horrible things and then instead of asking forgiveness and truly repenting, you just go to an indulgence seller and say, "Yeah, how about fifty bucks to cover that murder? Will I still get into heaven?" Luther also felt that the Bible is the central religious authority and not the church.

Then he wrote down 93 other things he didn't like and on October 31st, 1517, he nailed this list to a door for everyone to see. These are the famous 95 Theses and that is the last time I'll use that word because my sense of humor is so juvenile that I start laughing every time. So I'll use words like resolutions or complaints or decisions.

By doing what he did, he changed the church forever. Not everyone agreed with him and so they stayed with the Catholic Church. The rest of them, the Protestants, were still Christians, but they were re-formed.

He had the courage to rise up and speak out when he knew he could lose everything—which he did. He was finally excommunicated by the Catholic Church. On the other hand, then he got married and had five kids so maybe that worked out. But he didn't know how it would all turn out when he nailed that paper to the door. He acted out of the deep convictions of his heart and refused to back down.

He said, "I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen."

We often find ourselves in this same position in our lives—having a deep conviction and needing to act. There is something we need to change, something that our hearts are telling us is not right. It could be something in our lives or in ourselves or in our community that needs re-forming. Will we have the courage to proclaim that?

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Think about this: Martin Luther posted those 95 objections on the *door*. He didn't post them inside on the bulletin board in the narthex. He didn't post them on a sidewall. He posted them in a place where everyone entering would see them.

Sometimes we know something needs to change in our lives and we post our resolutions not on the door of our hearts, but in a small dark corner where they can be seen by no one and easily forgotten by ourselves.

When I was a chaplain I was talking with a man who was having his last chemotherapy and his teenage son and daughter were there. And he said to me, "Well, I tell ya, I've learned a lot through all this."

"What have you learned?" I asked.

"I'm going to be better to my family," he said firmly. His kids just looked at one another.

"Well, what is that going to look like?" I asked. Because saying, "I'm going to be better," really means nothing. There is no accountability. He wasn't nailing his decision on the front door, it was more like he was scotch-taping his resolution to a wall in the broom closet.

Then his son piped up. "Does that mean you'll stop yelling at us?"

There was this silence, and then he said, "Yes, I will stop yelling at you."

Then his daughter asked, "Will you leave work early once in a while and come to my soccer games?" Another silence, but shorter.

"Yes, I will come to your soccer games." Ah! Now he was nailing his resolutions to the door. And isn't a door so symbolic as that is the way we open or close our hearts to one another.

And what about the doorway? Every event – big and small – is a doorway through which we see the world and the world sees us. Every time we walk through the doorway we can see our decisions posted on the door of our hearts our desire for change and growth – for re-formation.

And now we come to **Moses**. You may remember that Moses is a major character in the Hebrew Scriptures. He shows up in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And after 40 years of wandering through the wilderness looking for the Promised Land, he finally comes upon it. And this was not forty years of staying in Motel 6 along the way. God says to Moses, "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

This is like starring in 100 films, nominated for ten Oscars and never receiving one. What. A. Bummer.

The next verse says, "Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command." Okay, it's not clear if Moses dropped dead at the news or if he died at some later time. One thing is clear is that God never abandoned him or the Israelites. Because we know that Joshua then became their leader and for sure, the Israelites had to re-form with a new leader.

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But what I want to focus on is that Moses died with dream unrealized. For forty years he tried to reach the Promised Land and he died before he could.

But isn't this such a common story? Think of someone you've known who has died and knew they were going to die soon. How many of them said, "Oh, I just want to live to see my kids graduate high school." "I just want to finish writing this book before I die." "I just want to see my daughter get married." "I want to live long enough to harvest the tomatoes." "I want to see the Grand Canyon." These are wonderful dreams and many people die before all their dreams are realized and I say this is a good thing.

Why? Dying with our dreams unfulfilled means that we never stopped dreaming, we never stopped reaching. If we die with half-written letters on our desks that means that we were still living. If we die with our in-boxes full, with wet clothes in the washer it means we were in the midst of life. If we die with *all* of our dreams realized it means that we've died while we were still living.

Even our friend Martin Luther said, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

And what is disappointment at not reaching a goal compared to no goal at all? Sometimes we are afraid to voice our dreams or set a goal because we are so afraid of disappointment. I think we need to re-form our lives to include disappointment, to welcome disappointment because it also means that we never stopped dreaming and we never stopped trying. Maybe instead of trying to protect our kids from disappointment we need to teach them how to process their disappointment and then move on.

Disappointment in life is like rain in Seattle: there's lots of it and you can't control it and it makes things grow. So we don't have to feel sorry for Moses.

Finally, we come to **Halloween**,² All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. I think most of us have heard of the Mexican holiday *Dia de Muertos* or Day of the Dead. It's a day to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died.

I think this important because by remembering the dead it reminds us that death does not end relationships but simply re-forms them. Have you ever lost a friend or loved one and then felt closer to them than ever before? The relationship continues but in a totally way different way.

I think Day of the Dead is also important because it reminds us that we too, will be dead at some point. If we take any of these holidays seriously, we should be more aware of death and so live our lives more fully. But sadly, it usually is just about the candy.

Which is why I was delighted to learn about another festival in the tiny village of Santa Marta in northwestern Spain. It happens every July 29th, the Feast Day of St. Martha, whose brother Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. The celebration starts with a procession of coffins through the village. The people in the coffins are alive.

² Also known as All Hallows' Eve (All Saints' Eve). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints%27_Day. Accessed 12/21/2017.

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These are people who, in the previous year, have been snatched from death. They survived a life-threatening illness, an attack or some kind of accident and they are grateful. Some people climb into a coffin because they are thankful that a relative has survived. But everyone in those coffins deeply understands that death could be right around the corner and they were given a reprieve. Truly understanding that can make us re-form our lives.

Losing a loved one to death also forces us to re-form. We have to re-form our family now that this person is gone. We have to reform our community—look at what happened after Jesus died! His family and community re-formed and became the church! Look at how this church re-formed when we got new pastors—some people left. New people came. We re-formed.

Of course we also have to re-form ourselves. When someone we love dies we grieve because our dreams of the future with them are gone. So there we are with Moses never having reached the Promised Land, such disappointment. But oh, what a journey. God was always present to Moses and God is always present to us.

Sometimes it feels like God is far, but Jesus promises, “Let not your hearts be troubled, nor let them be afraid, for Lo, I am with you always.”

Losing a loved one is doorway and we have to decide what we are going to nail on the doors of our hearts? Bitterness? Anger? Gratitude? Peace? Ninety-five ways to keep loving and living?

What about those of us who know we are approaching death? Won't death be our biggest re-formation of all? Our bodies re-form—back to the earth. But somehow I think we are like the piece of heavy wire—we can be formed and reformed but retain our essence.

The danger here is that we will go home and say, “We are nothing but wire coat hangers.”

Here is what I hope we take away: like Martin Luther we can have the courage of our convictions to boldly reform our world, our community, our lives, ourselves.

Like Moses we may not reach our goal, our Promised Land, but that just means we can re-form our lives to include disappointment so that we never stop dreaming.

And like the people of Santa Marta, we can be grateful for each moment we are given and we can be grateful for those who have been in our lives and passed on.

Above all we can deeply believe what St. Paul reminds us, that, “Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor trials in the present, nor any trial to come, neither height, nor depth, nor all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God.”³ – Amen

UCUCC: DJ

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/12/14/2017

³ Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. 1989. Romans 8:38-39.