

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church
On October 29, 2023.**

VIEW THE PROMISED LAND

<Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 1:1-6; Matthew 22:34-46>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

It was dark when we first arrived to Yellowstone National Park, and so there wasn't much for me to see. I lamented the fact that I would have to wait one more day to really see any of the vistas that I had heard so much about, though it perhaps helped our passage through the park as traffic was no longer as congested. I remember rolling down the window and letting the smell of the trees and the sound of the river fill my senses, in absence of my eyes being filled to overflowing with the vision that these smells and sounds represented. And as we drove in darkness, my mind dreamt of the vision that lay just beyond my perceiving. I had made it to our destination, but I knew that I had not yet fully arrived.

In 1901 John Muir wrote of Yellowstone: "The air is electric and full of ozone, healing, reviving, exhilarating, kept pure by frost and fire, while the scenery is wild enough to awaken the dead" (*Wilderness Essays*, p182). I did not know these words on that evening, but I already knew the truth of them, and my heart yearned to be awakened by the scenery, my eyes hungered for the view to fill them. I was on the edge of something new, a year of service and ministry living at the West Gate entrance, and all I could dream of was what was to come. All I could live with, in those immediate hours, was the fullness of what had not yet been fully realized.

Moses, I imagine, might have felt somewhat similar. He has had a long journey from where he started, from where we joined him at the burning bush. He has returned to Egypt to face Pharaoh and lead the people out of bondage, following God. He has directed and guided the people, stubborn and stiff-necked, through the wilderness. And now, he has nearly arrived at the Promised Land. As a reward, he is lead by God to a place wherein he can see all that lays before him, before the people. All that will be new; but not yet fully realized. His eyes soak in the view. His senses are filled with the fulfilling of the promise. And he is told that he is not to be the one to enter.

I can't imagine what that might have been like for Moses. To travel such a distance; not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally, as well, and to learn that he could only look at a distance at what had been promised. My initial sense is that, to be tantalized and teased in such a way would be almost unbearable...to know that I was so close, and yet that I would not be able to go any closer. It seems almost too much to bear.

And at the same time, it seems to all too familiar.

Humans exist within a spiritual tension. We have within us the seeds of eternity, and share commonality with the stuff that makes up the stars of the cosmos. Our innermost beings carry the understanding and awareness of the very Kingdom of God. And yet, it is simultaneously not yet realized, leaving us feeling disconnected, as if there's something there, just beyond sight and reach, which we cannot attain. Like Moses, journeying to the threshold of the Promised Land and then looking upon it, without being able to enter it, we feel the dissonance of something that was intended to be but isn't quite realized.

We see the evidence of it, almost daily, in our news and in our living. The strife, anger, hurt, and suffering of Israel and Palestine, and of other war-torn areas, speaks to this. The hunger of almost entire nations in Saharan Africa speaks to this. The unmet need for connection and community across our country speaks to this. And if we were to dwell too much or too long upon it, it could become unbearable. It is grief and loss. It is anger and hurt. It is divide and separation. We yearn to realize the vision of what is just beyond our reach, and we mourn the distance that exists between us and that realization, a darkness that separates our eyes from the splendor that is around us. And quite often, we lament at what we do not know to do.

But into this reality, into this yearning, into this desire to realize the vision, Jesus speaks a single word: *Shema*.

Again, the Pharisees have come to Jesus in an attempt to trip him up and catch him in a wrong answer. They have demanded a rationalization for his authority; they have sought to trap him in a lose-lose situation; they have attempted to catch him off-guard. And now they are trying again, taking a legal approach, asking him to give his determination on which is the greatest law, the greatest commandment. We know that there are the Ten Commandments, of which Jesus could chose any one, but there were also over 600 other minor commands and decrees that followed in Scripture. Which of these might Jesus pick, saying was the most important, the greatest? Would he, in the eyes of the Pharisees, choose correctly?

Jesus does answer correctly: *Shema, Israel, Adonai elohenu. Adonai ehad.* "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God. The Lord alone."

Harkening back to the very first of the Ten Commandments, setting the tone for right relationship and right living, Jesus proclaims the words from Deuteronomy that are so important, so foundational, that they are written on a scroll and placed on the doorframe of the house, so that every member of the People of Israel might see them on every occasion of coming and going, each day. Known today as the *Shema* it is the call, the command to "hear," and in hearing, to proclaim. The Lord is God. The Lord alone.

But it doesn't end there. Immediately following is "And you shall love the Lord the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In response to the Pharisees' question, Jesus answers with the prime edict.

And then he expands upon it. He couples the command to love God - with all heart, soul, and might - with loving neighbor as one's self.

To love God, then, is to also love one's neighbor, one's fellow human being.

I don't believe that this is a mere academic or legal exercise. Since entering Jerusalem ahead of the Passover Celebration and going to the Temple, where he has been relentlessly questioned and tested, Jesus has responded time and again in terms of the Kingdom of God. Throughout all these discourses, undergirding all of it, Jesus is elucidating and showing forth not only the nature of the Kingdom of God but also the way in which to realize it.

The very thing for which we yearn, the vista within our spirits of the Kingdom of God, that which we mourn not realizing...is now being placed within our reach! How do we realize and manifest the Kingdom of God? *Shema*. Hear, and listen: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor.

In the living out - deep and wide - of this two-part, interrelated commandment, the Kingdom of God takes greater root and realizes greater tangible manifestation. We no longer live only in a state of viewing the Promised Land from afar, we are enabled to touch and abide. Taste, and See that the Lord is good - active, tangible verbs of realization. We no longer glimpse the Kingdom of God, we live out the Kingdom of God. It is no longer a vision before us; it is a realization in, through, and around us.

The next morning, after my arrival to West Yellowstone, I awoke early. Well, early for someone in his early-20's. I sat on the porch with my coffee and I let my eyes soak in all that my mind had dreamt of, but which had been unseen the night before. I watched as the light of the day continued to spread further and further over the mountains and the trees, with the sound of the river a constant background voice of joyous proclamation. I began to realize that which I had only imagined and barely glimpsed. It was the new morning, of a new season, and a new ministry.

On this new morning, here in this place and gathered with one another, the vision of the Kingdom of God continues to be realized and manifested, more and more. How shall we live into the new thing that God is doing in this day, in this week, in this season? Hear, O People, the Lord is God. The Lord alone. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and might; and love your neighbor. Amen.