

The Message for Sunday, August 15, 2010

Title: “The View from Mt. Nebo”

Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-40

I. On top of Nebo... In January of 1988, I stood on top of Mt. Nebo in present-day Jordan and saw the Holy Land for the first time. It was an awe-inspiring sight. We had flown out of JFK and eventually landed at Amman, Jordan. The next day, our tour bus took us to the top of Mt. Nebo. And, *like* Moses, I was able to gaze over into the Promised Land. *Unlike* Moses, I had ridden to the top in a tour bus; and *unlike* Moses, I was going to be able to cross over the Jordan River and enter the Holy Land the next day. Moses had been forbidden the fulfillment of that dream.

You may remember that God had called to Moses out of the burning bush at Mt. Sinai. God had asked him to return to Egypt to lead the Israelite children out of slavery and back to their homeland in Palestine. You may also remember that once they were out of Egypt, the Israelites became restless and complained about many things. They were thirsty and hungry. God provided for them sweet water to drink, and then sent the flaky bread called manna. When they arrived at Rephidim, they once again found themselves without water. Again, they grumbled.

We have to move from the book of Exodus to the book of Numbers to get the details of what happened next. When they complained about having no water at Rephidim, God told Moses to go to a certain rock and to raise his staff over the huge monolith out there in the desert. Moses took the staff; but instead of simply raising it above the rock, Moses struck the rock twice.

Immediately, water poured forth in great abundance. God honored His promise to protect and provide for the children of Israel; but what Moses did angered God. First, by striking the rock, it appeared as though Moses did not trust God to do it the way God had commanded. Second, when Moses struck the rock, it could have seemed that the water gushed forth more because of the power of Moses than because of the power of God. It took some of the holiness away. For those reasons, God told Moses and his brother, Aaron, that neither of them would be able to enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 20:1-13)

II. Moses and God’s promise... After Moses had received the Ten Commandments; and after the people had made the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain of God; and, after the people had finally gotten to the banks of the Jordan River, Moses sent spies into the Promised Land.

When the spies returned, they brought back a report of the fertility of the land and examples of its produce. They described the land as flowing with milk and honey. That was the good news. The bad news was that the inhabitants of the land appeared as giants. They were so large and powerful, the Israelites seemed as grasshoppers in comparison. (See Numbers 14)

For that reason, the people of Israel rebelled and threatened to elect a captain who would take them back to Egypt. It was then that God told Moses none of that present

generation, except for a very few, would live to see the Promised Land. Instead, the tribes of Israel would be forced to wander in the wilderness of Sinai until the entire generation that had rebelled against the Lord had died out. Only then would the Israelites be permitted to cross over into Palestine.

And now, we come to the end of nearly forty years. Moses has brought the future generations to the banks of the Jordan. Aaron had already died; and Moses was about to die. God told him to go up on the top of Mt. Nebo and look over into the land the Israelites had been promised. But, that was as far as Moses was allowed to go. The promise of God was going to be fulfilled, but Moses was not going to be able to see it.

I am reminded of something Nelson Henderson once said: “The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” (http://thehumanimprint.typepad.com/the_human_imprint/2008/11/10-quotes-on-ex.html) By leading the Children of Israel to the Promised Land, Moses had fulfilled his life’s purpose: he had planted a tree under which future generations would sit.

III. Promises for the early Christians... The fulfilling of promises is exactly the same issue for the writer of Hebrews in the 11th chapter. Hebrews is often called an “epistle,” or letter. But, in reality, it is probably most like a sermon. While no one actually knows who wrote it—or to whom it was written—it is clear that it was sent to an early Christian community of believers who had learned that there is a high cost for being a Christian.

In chapter 10, the author asks his readers to recall the earlier days when they had received Christ. They had to endure hard struggles and sufferings, including losing their possessions. He then says that they will need endurance. The impression is given that it may be a while before they would receive what was promised (Hebrews 10:32-36).

In chapter 11, the author says that women received their dead by resurrection. That is probably a reference to a passage in Maccabees (2 Maccabees 6-7) where a mother who is being tortured for her faith is promised she will be reunited in eternity with her sons, who have also been martyred.

He says that others were tortured, mocked, flogged, put in chains, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword and had to go about in skins of sheep and goats. This may refer to being so poor that they were not able to afford woven clothes and were forced to wander around, living in the desert places or in caves or holes in the ground—as in the underground cities of Cappadocia. Or, it may refer to the practice of sewing Christians into animal skins, and letting wild animals loose on them in the arena.

About all of this, the writer says, “...these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised...” (Hebrews 11:39).

IV. Our situations... Isn’t that the way you feel sometimes: Commended for your faith, but did not receive what was promised? I can not tell you how many times I have heard: “Preacher, I try to do everything right; but things keep happening to me.”

There have been times in my life when I have felt the same way. I remember once serving a church that was very difficult. Some might even say that it was dysfunctional. After 3 or 4 years, I was completely worn out. I had done everything I knew to do to be

the best pastor possible. But, I kept having to deal with significant problems relating to the life and ministry of that congregation.

I remember sitting in the den of our home and having a really frank prayer with God. I wanted to know what I had done to deserve everything that I had experienced? I felt like Moses, standing on Mt. Nebo, looking out over a Promised Land, but thinking that I would never get to cross over into that day when the church would emerge triumphant.

I think that many of us have that same feeling from time to time. I recently talked with a person from a former congregation who had been through a divorce because her husband had gotten deeply involved with drugs. She was having trouble with many aspects of her life. Her finances were tight. She was having trouble finding a circle of support. She could not find a guy who wanted to ask her out. She just sat at home at night, watched television and ate. As a result, she had put on quite a lot of weight. Her life was a mess.

She confessed to me that she had always tried to live a good and pure life. She had always tried to be a Christian. Why hadn't she received the blessings she thought she had been promised by living right? What she wanted was for God to intervene and stop the pain she was feeling.

I thought that was reasonable. It is at a time like that when I want to know, "When is the promise going to be fulfilled?" We have all been on top of Mt. Nebo, looking on some kind of "promised land," and languishing because we feel as though we are not going to get to cross over our own Jordan River and into the promised land of our lives.

V. Solace... It is at a time like that when I take great solace in true stories about real people, like the one told by Nancy Missler, co-founder of Koinonia House in California. In the mid-1930s, a German pastor was abducted from his church, handcuffed, taken to prison and immediately put into a small cell. Suspected of aiding Jews, he had no hearing, no trial, not even time to let his family know what had happened to him.

For weeks, this gentle pastor asked the prison guard outside his cell door if he could contact his family and, at least, let them know he was alive. The guard, however, was a contemptible man who hated anyone who had to do with Jews. He not only wouldn't let the pastor contact his family; he also determined to make the pastor's life as miserable as possible.

The sadistic guard purposefully skipped the pastor's cell when meals were handed out. He made the pastor go weeks without a bath; he kept lights burning in his room so he couldn't sleep; he blasted his short-wave radio, hoping the constant noise would break the pastor's spirit; he used filthy language; he pushed him; he shoved him; and, when he could, he arranged for the pastor to have the most difficult job in the labor force.

The pastor, on the other hand, prayed over and over again not to let his natural hate for this guard consume him. He chose, instead, to forgive the guard and to show him God's unconditional love. As the months went by, whenever he could, the pastor smiled at the guard; he thanked him when his meals did come; when the guard was near his cell, the pastor told him about his wife and his children; he even questioned the guard about

his own family and about his goals, ideas and visions. And one time, for a quick moment, he had a chance to tell the guard about Christ and His love.

The guard never answered a word, but obviously heard it all. After months of choosing to love this terrible guard, unconditionally, God's love finally broke through. One night as the pastor was again quietly talking to him, the guard cracked a smile. The next day, instead of his cell being skipped for lunch, the pastor got an additional ration. The following evening, he was allowed not only to go to the showers, but also to stay as long as he wanted. The lights began going off at night in his cell, and the radio noise ceased. Finally, one afternoon, the guard came into the pastor's cell, asked him how to get in touch with his family, and made contact. A few months later, the pastor was mysteriously released, with no questions asked. (Nancy Missler, "Against the tide: Faith choices," *Koinonia House Online*, khouse.org. Retrieved February 19, 2004. Used in "Olympic Faith, *Hebrews 11:29-12:2*, 8/15/2004, www.homileticsonline.com)

At some point through all of this nightmare, I am sure the pastor thought, "Why is this happening to me? Oh God, I have only tried to be your servant. When is the promise of blessing going to fall on me?" Eventually, it did. Eventually, when most of us would have given up, the promise was fulfilled.

Or, consider something I read just this past week. Sixty years ago, Mary Jean (Price) Walls graduated from high school in Springfield, Missouri, as the salutatorian of her class. She applied to Missouri State University but was denied admission. The reason: At that time, the school did not admit African Americans. Mary Walls never got the chance to go to college. She is now seventy-eight years of age and recently retired from her job as a janitor.

On July 30, 2010, at its summer commencement, Missouri State University will award Mary Jean Walls an honorary degree. She could have been bitter and refused the degree. But as a symbol of hope, she will accept the degree to help teach her twelve grandchildren and her fourteen great-grandchildren a lesson about patience and hope. There is a promise of a better world than the one into which Mary Jean graduated. (*The Week*, vol. 10, issue 474, July 30, 2010, "It Wasn't All Bad," p. 4. See also <http://news.missouristate.edu/2010/07/26/summer-commencement-to-award-527-degrees/>)

VI. In His time... Someone once said, "You can't break God's promises by leaning on them" (anonymous). I believe that, but I also believe that it sometimes takes an incredibly long time for the promises to be fulfilled. In the interim, we have to remember some of God's promises that help us cope.

God promises His presence in Hebrews when it says, "I will never leave thee" (Hebrews 13:5). In Genesis, God promises His protection when it says, "I am thy shield" (Genesis 15:1). God promises strength in Isaiah: "I will strengthen thee" (Isaiah 41:10). God promises His rest in Matthew for those of us who are weary: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). In 1 Samuel, God provides His faithfulness: "The Lord will not forsake His people for His great name's sake" (1 Samuel 12:22). And finally, God provides—period. Romans says, "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

The way we claim those promises is through Christ. Christ is the fulfilled promise of God's eternal and everlasting care for all of His creation. Christ is what makes it

possible for those of us who find ourselves standing on top of Mt. Nebo to know that God's promises are true and that they will be fulfilled—in God's time, not ours. But, they will be fulfilled.

And so, if you find yourselves, today, standing on Mt. Nebo, longing to cross whatever personal Jordan River that separates you from the promise fulfilled, remember that as Christ rose victorious from the defeat of death, so too can we rise victoriously from whatever it is that has kept us from having the promise fulfilled.

Remember the German pastor who was eventually released from the Nazi prison. Remember Mary Jean Walls, who finally got her degree. And remember a pastor, who through patience, the love of Christ and his trust in God, finally saw a congregation strengthened and emerge as a powerful witness for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God, in His time, fulfills His promises. Amen.

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