

## **"To The Holy Land"**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Psalm 48 and Deuteronomy 34: 1-8

"The secret to life," as sculptor Henry Moore put it, "is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is – it must be something you cannot possibly do!" The journey to the Promised Land, which was the journey to freedom, which was the journey to God, was that task for Moses. Second-century Rabbi Tarfon put it similarly: "It is not up to you to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to avoid it."

*Tikkun olam* is the Jewish ethic that develops from this perspective – from Moses on Mount Nebo, getting close enough to see paradise, but not reaching it.

"Repair of the world," it translates (Cooperrider, p90).

We don't talk about Deuteronomy very much in the church. It is often one of those uncomfortable books of the Bible. In fact, many Christians have written off the whole Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible, on account of many uncomfortable texts. Meanwhile, the lectionary, which often is a good resource for worship, doesn't include much of our Bible. It can't! We rehearse

the same stories and often miss out on the richness that is the rest of our Bible. One of the things I most appreciate here in this church is that by using thematic worship for most of the year, we get a chance to look at less familiar scriptures.

Deuteronomy 34 follows right after Deuteronomy 33. I know you are surprised by that fact! What you may not know is that Deuteronomy 33 is a whole chapter of blessing on the tribes of Israel as they are about to enter the Promised Land. As you probably know, Moses has led the “stiff-necked” Israelites through a lot after securing their release from Pharaoh in Egypt all those years ago. Now, they stand on the cusp of entering that land which God promised them and Moses dedicated his life to securing. We pick up the story in chapter 34 as God has invited Moses up Mount Nebo and is showing him the Promised Land.

Daniel Cooperrider, in his book *Speak With the Earth and It Will Teach You*, invites us to join Moses on the journey up the mountain and the experience there. I hope you’ll find some correlation to your own mountaintop experiences, and also that you will begin to consider what is, or has been, your life calling and what it looks like when you stand on the cusp of realizing the dream that has carried you all these years:

I stand for a moment, thinking about Moses reaching the top of Mount Nebo. He had just offered his final words – known as “The Blessings of

Moses" -- to his people. "May God bless you," he said as he left them for his final mountain climb, "with the choicest gifts of the ancient mountains; and the fruitfulness of the everlasting hills" (Deuteronomy 33:15). Having blessed them this last time, he left the group and hiked up Mount Nebo alone.

I imagine the view opening up before him as he reached the summit. Mount Nebo rises in western Jordan to a height of 2,740 feet, although its perch seems much higher as it looks down on the Dead Sea, 1,385 feet below sea level. Across the Dead Sea, Moses would have looked out at a sweeping landscape, taking in the Jordan River valley, with towns like Jericho and Bethlehem, and, on a clear day, Jerusalem in the distance. God offered Moses a view of his heart's deepest longing -- a panorama of the Promised Land. I imagine Moses lingering with that view for a while, not wanting to leave it. And perhaps he never did. Moses breathed his last breaths somewhere on or near Mount Nebo. In the fourth century, a monastery was built on the mountain to commemorate his view of the Promised Land and to mark his grave.

Where would you need to go, or what would you need to do, to get a panoramic vision of your life's purpose? What would you need to see to fill you with joy looking out on your life? You know, so often we talk about the impact people made on the world as we offer eulogies at their funeral. It seems that sometimes others can see our life purpose as well or better than we can. They see the difference we make. They see the leadership we provided, personally or professionally. They see the gifts we share that we often don't see. The worst of it is that people often don't tell us what they see in us, or what they've gained from our presence. No, we humans often wait until someone is deceased to talk

about how special they were. Sadly, there are a lot of people who don't see that they offer anything to this world at all. They are no Moses. They haven't done much...we haven't done much.

I hope for you that instead of believing that you don't offer much, that you might find the place in which you can get the panoramic view of your life.

"Panorama comes from the Greek roots pan (all, total) and horama (sight, spectacle, that which is seen). It means something like "The view of the all," "the total view," "the whole view," "all embracing," "comprehensive," "entire," "complete." "[From the top of the mountain]," says Cooperrider, "We can see how the world fits together, where things are in relation to one another – we can see how all things are related, connected. Mountains offer us the glimpse of the Whole, the All, -- where all things belong and the beauty of God shines through. "Out of Zion," the Psalmist writes, again dreaming of that holy mountain of the world-to-come, "the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Psalm 50:2).

On Wednesday of this week, I went hiking with my sister, which is one of my favorite things to do. We hiked in an area near Traverse City that used to be flooded with waters of the Boardman River, but after removal of the dams, it is now an open area with the river swiftly running through it. First, we went into

the valley, and we saw the river and crossed it on a couple of bridges. It was a normal hike for us, talking about life and whatever else came up. But after a few miles in we had to climb out of the valley – and it was a climb! I didn't count the steps, but I was quite breathless when I got to the top. Then there was the overlook. We could see the valley that we had just hiked. It all made sense now, where we'd been and what we'd done – both physically and in our conversation. I'm not sure we knew it at the time, but we talked about the purposes of our lives and about how the journey is changing at this stage. In some ways, we can only see the valley we are presently in, but from time to time, we can go to the overlook and see how it all fits together.

In this most excellent chapter from Cooperrider's book, he talks about his own journey up Buck Mountain in Vermont. I couldn't do it justice if I had to, but if you read one chapter of his book, this would be a good one. For in it, we are reminded of our life's calling. Sometimes in the valley, we forget. Remember all the times that Moses wanted to quit, or God wanted to be rid of the Israelites, or the Israelites wanted to get rid of both God and Moses? During the journey, we often forget where we're going, or why we're going there. Everyone needs their Mount Nebo experience, where they can fully appreciate the panoramic view. It truly is a hike to the Holy Land of our own lives. Whether we enter it or not, we

can see that our lives have meaning, and purpose, and that we fit in the grand tapestry that is God's world.

In Cooperrider's words:

For a moment, everything feels in its proper perspective. Everything belongs and everything belongs to everything else. The way everything seems to fit together when viewed from above, it makes sense that when the Biblical imagination envisions the world made perfect, it pictures a mountaintop scene. Known in scripture as "Mount Zion," "God's holy mountain," "the new Jerusalem," "the mountain of the Lord's temple," the Bible sees in mountains a glimpse of the more beautiful world that is to come, the future justice, the future glory. At the very end of the Bible, an angel of God leads John "to a mountain great and high" (Revelation 21:10), to see the new heaven and the new earth and gives the Bible its benediction—God shall be with the people and God will wipe away their tears and weeping and mourning and death will be no more.

If you want to see paradise, the Bible seems to say at the end, go climb a mountain and look out, and shining through the landscape of this world, you just might glimpse it – everything fitting together – perfection perfected for a moment – a panorama of the Promised Land – the earth as the sanctuary, as the holy land...that it is.

Alleluia! Amen.