



“What Are You Leaving Your Children?”

Proverbs 22:6 & Deuteronomy 6:1-9

12/3/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

This story about Moses was written about 700 years before Christ. It was a way of celebrating Israel’s sacred history with the contemporary generation and that is why Moses’ sermon speaks of the succeeding generations. It was saying that all that happened in Moses’ time was the beginning of the blessings and responsibilities that have been handed down even to the present.

Just before this, Moses was reminding the people about his experience on Mt. Sinai – summarizing the ten commandments. The people said, “To our amazement we heard God and saw God’s glory and did not die. Let’s not risk this again so you, Moses, listen to whatever else God has to say and then tell us and we’ll do whatever you say.”

After his experience on the mountain, he spent the rest of his life a changed man and he wanted everyone to have the same sense of awe. Did you ever stop and wonder how your life would change if you actually saw God?

Moses is shown not only as a law giver but also a teacher and his words here are a sermon – elaborating on the first of the commandments about having no other gods. Moses’ speech has two parts. First he’s talking about reverencing God.

Moses thought that if they could learn to reverence God and follow the commandments, they would have long life. When they would get old, *in their 40’s and 50’s in those days*, they would naturally realize they were near the end of their lives and would wonder about the great beyond. To the ancient Jew, survival beyond death in the dim place called “Sheol”¹ offered no great satisfaction, so a longer life in the sunshine of this earth was much more appealing.

For most people then and now, despite occasional

tragic circumstances, life on earth seems good and is thought of as something worth living and preserving. Curiously enough, though, the religions of the world divide on this question.

Christianity and Western religions generally affirm the goodness of life, but those of the East, (more focused on the sorrow of living), teach that life is a trap filled with only the illusion of happiness. Hindus see life as full of pain and have the need for continual reincarnation until they get it “right.”

Buddhists traditionally teach that we should live in a state of peacefulness – living without striving to want or possess more and more. They teach we should avoid personal desire and longing because it causes only sorrow and shallow materialism. They advise us to realize our oneness with all of life and not worry about the next life. While there is a lot of wisdom in that religion, there isn’t a personal god. In contrast, Jesus viewed life as good and he came so “that they might have life and have it more abundantly” as John put it.

Going back to Moses: his first point was that a long and satisfying life could be obtained if one revered God and lived life as God had instructed.

The second part of his talk, starting at verse 4, begins with the Hebrew word “schema” meaning “hear.” “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One.” This phrase is called the “schema” to this day and it begins every worship service and ritual in Judaism. It was a restatement of the positive form of the first commandment to worship only the one God.

The Jews taught that God could not be divided up into several deities – one helping out in war, another for agriculture or for love (as was thought by the neighboring religions). Moses taught that they were to respond to this one God with a single-minded love – heart, mind and soul. Moses charged them to teach this passion for God to their children – to talk about it when they’re sitting in their beach chair by the pool or when they’re climbing up a ladder to fix a window.

¹ mentioned often in the Psalms

They were to paste a note about it on the dashboards of their chariots, to stick it under their sweat bands when they went jogging and to nail it on their front doors. “Be fanatic about it” he was saying, ... “put reminder notes all over the place if you have to.”

But sure enough, because human beings need symbols and rituals to keep them from forgetting, people ended up literally tying these scripture verses to their wrists and foreheads and door posts. The Pharisees went overboard with their symbols and rituals because some of them were desperate for approval of others. Because their self-worth was so low, they felt that they had to show off how religious they were in hopes of gaining worth in other’s eyes.

On the other hand, when we go in the opposite direction and forget God’s place in our lives, we are robbed of our identity and the reasons for our life in the present. For ancient Israel and for us today, religious amnesia has always been a danger for us. So Moses was calling people to preserve their religious heritage and memory in their worship liturgy and in their daily lives. The problem was never that *God* forgot people but that *we* have often forgotten about God.

Through the centuries, when we have remembered God’s instructions for life and have revered God, it has always brought order to society. Forgetting these things has lead people to hypocrisy, self-righteousness and more seriously, to a loss of identity and a loss of passion for God.² But not only have we shown that we are capable of forgetting God, we have often forgotten the meaning of our religious symbolism and liturgy. Test yourself sometime: would you be able to clearly explain why Christian churches baptize infants?³

Jesus was often disappointed to see religious leaders of his time focusing only on their rituals and laws – forgetting the reasons and the spirit behind the symbolism. Jesus saw them suffer near total amnesia

² See Brown & Saliers, `Proclamation 2, Pentecost 3` p.40-41.

³ To read more about the meaning of Baptism, go to www.connectedness.org and then click on the Resources button, then click on the Sermons button. In the list, find 1/10/1999 and click on the link to the right of “The Meaning of Baptism.”

about the major point of all their religious rituals.

In a conversation with one religious lawyer, Jesus lifted up the schema passage as the greatest commandment. The fact that we are to worship this one God (with everything we have) and love others (as we do ourselves) summarizes all of religious history.

It would be a distortion of this sermon of Moses to think that he was only talking about keeping the law. His whole point was that we’ve got to reverence God so much that it shows up in our behavior – demonstrating that we love God with the force of our entire personality. And all this, Moses said, is to be emphatically handed down to our children and our children’s children.

In thinking through Moses’ sermon that he gave several thousand years ago, I’ve often thought about what I am handing down to my child (and perhaps others with whom I come into contact). I started reminiscing through some of my life’s experiences and if you’ve listened to the sermons in the last three years, you are aware that I have had some unusual experiences.

I’ve seen, first hand, the sobering life-death struggles of people when I was working in a Chicago hospital. As you know, that experience caused me to frankly ask myself (at age twenty), “What have you contributed to anyone else?” I’ve lived in the ghetto of the inner city and sat on the hillsides of the Swiss Alps. And I’ve stood beside grieving widows and widowers, ... children and parents. I feel as if I have seen most everything in life – the exquisite excellence of the ballet and symphony and the fathomless despair of a friend, sitting beside me, shooting heroin into his arm.

But despite the enormous amount of pain I’ve seen through the years, God’s Spirit has always created new images of hope and purpose for living. Somehow the strength from God’s presence *does* make life more good than it is bad. And in my own way, I’ve come to view life as sort of a merry-go-round on which we all travel.

I think that most of the time we don’t stop in our busyness of life to listen to the music that God is playing for us. And although we all seem to spin around in repeating patterns and experiences, I think

there are more things possible for our life if we expect to see God giving us possibilities for a reason.

Along the edge of this ride of life, there is a ring game where you can, if you try, reach for a wooden ring and sometimes you're surprised to get a brass ring. And I think God keeps putting brass rings in the game for us – but we have to remember to look for them and then reach for them. All this is to say that life is good and God is with us as we move through life – but life has so much more if we open ourselves up to expect more. Do you expect more from God and your life?

One summer, years ago, I had taken my daughter Deidre and a friend of hers named Kristen to the zoo and I was thinking about what I was passing on to my daughter. The first thing I wanted to be sure to give her was myself. We were walking around looking at the animals and as I saw the laughter and delight on her face and her friend's face, I thought of the poem I had written.

Some of you have heard this poem before but it goes like this.



“As a Father”

“I didn't want to miss your infancy,
So in the middle of the night I wobbled into your room,
Sleepy-eyed, with your mother,
Just to make things warm and dry again.

I didn't want to miss your early years,
So I put my work aside,
And, with you, carefully examined all the toys on your blanket,
Because they were just as important as my toys.

I didn't want to miss your childhood,
So I stopped reading a good novel
(Its content I can't remember).
I stopped doing that little chore I had finally begun,
And I rode you on my back like a wild horse,
Dancing with delight inside myself
To the tune of your pure laughter.

I didn't want to miss your youth,

So I interrupted my agenda at the desk
And drew with chalk all over our driveway,
Hop-scotching around from square to square
With my tie flapping ridiculously from my chest.
And I watched, from the corner of my eye,
Your smile of approval of my hopping,
And your very adult-like waiting for your turn.

I don't want to miss your adolescence
Your thrills of accomplishments
Or your tears of rejection.
Instead, I'm going to share my thrills with you
And my feelings of rejection
And together we'll talk into the evenings about
All the odd shaped pieces of life's puzzle
Because it is only worth doing with another.
And I will not miss your adulthood,
Because as you change your values,
I will laugh at some of my own worn out views
And I will rediscover a simplicity
That the years have complicated in me.
Because I will see in you a creation of God
Shaped by the eternal hands and human time and circumstances,
That began in your infancy, on the first day, such a short time ago.

As a father pieteith his child, so the Lord pieteith those reverencing God. . . . Psalm 103:13



But as we were walking along in the zoo, that day, we came upon a merry-go-round. I don't know then whether it was there temporarily or if it had been installed permanently but there was a merry-go-round on the zoo grounds and of course I got tickets for both of them. And as Deidre and Kristen rode around like little elves riding on a dream in motion, of course I started to think about my philosophy, that life is like a merry-go-round and about reaching for brass rings.

And I saw the pure joy my daughter was having and I was glad that I had been participating in her life, sharing that experience. And I knew that not only had I received the brass ring of a good marriage but another one of the delightful company of my daughter.

I looked around at the faces of the parents who were also watching their children enjoy that ride. And



their faces were filled with the empathy of delight in their children's joy. *I wish I had a painting or a photograph of the faces of those parents.* As they were watching, they were reliving their childhood rides – trying to hold on to that purity of joy in those moments.

And when the kids had gotten off the merry-go-round, I wanted to tell them about my brass ring philosophy of life – about my sense of adventure that life holds – but I couldn't because they were too young. But I wanted to affirm life somehow, so I took them over to the zoo gift shop and got them both (to be fair to Deidre's friend) the biggest stuffed animal I could find. (They were Raccoons.) Later, I told the other girl's mother the whole story – of how the gift was an expression of the heart – that it was my way of affirming life. And I think her mother understood.

But along with affirming life and along with trying to give myself to my daughter for these very short years she was with us, I realized that something else was needed. And after that zoo experience I decided to formulate something to hand down to her – something simple enough to enable her to summarize an understanding of faith and an approach to life.

So in the weeks that followed, I would sit by her bed at night and I had her learn those five things that seem most important to me (that I shared with our children today). She says: (1.) Making God special is the beginning of all wisdom, (2.) God loves me, (3.) Always remember other people's feelings, (4.) Do the very best you can at whatever you do, (5) If you can afford to have it, you can afford to share it.⁴ Because like Moses (who never entered the promised land but only saw it from afar), there will be many lands into which our children will travel without us being along. And I wanted to give her something to take with her besides memories of our relationship. Obviously there is a lot more we want them to take with them

⁴ Obviously it could use a little more Christology but I thought I'd cut these down to the absolute trans-cultural, trans-religious basics and trust her Sunday School training and our household discussions to fill in the rest about Jesus.

(like remembering to turn out the lights, even though they don't pay the electric bills).

But all of us are standing in the stream of history, looking back to our parents who have handed down the meanings of life to us as best they could. And we watch the children stream up to the front of church each week, realizing that what we are giving them will be taken into their futures – times and places in which we will not have a part.

So if Moses were here today, maybe he would have put it like this, "You've heard the commandments and customs that have been handed down. You've been taught them for years. If you make God most special in your life and try to follow what has been suggested, you'll find that life is full of meaning and maybe you'll find a brass ring or two. Listen and take all this seriously – there are blessings in it.

There is only one true God. Love God with everything you've got – your head, your heart and your life-style. And just so you don't forget it, be telling your kids about the reality of God's presence.

Say it when you're stuck in your car in the middle of a traffic jam. Write "sticky-notes" and stick them with magnets on your refrigerator, ... write them on your grocery bags when you are shopping, ... paint them on the side of your car, your house and your T-shirts.

You see, it's God Who has brought you into this life, into the stream of beautiful people whom God loves. If you're lucky enough to have reliable cars, VCRs, patient friends and enough medicine to keep the arthritis at bay, remember the source of the good in life. Even better things are on the way but don't take this for granted.

Instead, reverence God, ... do the best you can at living your life (because no one else is going to live it for you). And if you do, life will be the absolute best that it can be. ■

