

Deuteronomy 8:6-19
October 16, 2022
Ellen Crawford True

Grounded

Between the bookends of last week's text and this week's, God has gifted the people with the Law. They have in turn broken the covenant and created and worshiped a golden calf. Moses has broken the original stone tablets in anger. God has decided that these are not the people he wants after all. The people have pleaded with Moses to ask God's forgiveness. And God has had a change of heart. New tablets have been inscribed and another new chapter has begun. Now the people stand on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Moses will not go with them. Today's passage serves as a commencement address in a way, final words for the people Moses has led for decades and now prepares to send on their way. [Deuteronomy 8:6-19]

The session—the governing board of this congregation—is reading a book together, *Think Again* by Adam Grant. We're only two chapters in, and already the book has spawned reflection and discussion about how we think what we think. This past Tuesday evening we found ourselves laughing about getting stuck on Mt. Stupid. That S-word—along with others—is one we rightly discourage our children from using to demean others or themselves. Grant uses this notion as a way to check in with ourselves and notice when we get stuck breathing the rarefied air of the mountaintop. He urges us to notice when we decide we are experts without possessing actual expertise. We start out as novices and then gain just enough experience and knowledge to become amateurs. That is when we land in the danger zone. That is when we risk getting stuck, when we need to rethink our thinking.

This pattern is nothing new. As Moses tries to prepare his beloved Israelites, the ones he has fussed over and been fed up with for four decades—to enter the land they have all dreamed of, he cautions them about the temptations they will face in the new land they are about to

inhabit. He warns that they will be tempted to overestimate their power and their prowess. As a friend once said, he wants to right-size them in their britches before they forget all that has come before and who exactly has brought them through to this new beginning.¹

It's good counsel, faithful even, and it sounds more poignant when I remember that it is written down long after the wandering ones have settled in the Promised Land. While Deuteronomy is attributed to Moses, scholars now understand that:

It was written and arranged to help the people understand and make sense of their history and current condition – especially the realities of the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.²

The kingdom does not fall all at once. It is destroyed bit by bit, invasion by invasion. At the time Deuteronomy is recorded in its final form, the people are on foreign soil. It can be difficult to know where to stand, to find their footing when the life they and their parents and grandparents had known is no more. They need help making sense—much as we do—not just of the world gone by but the world right here, right now. And Moses' words are not merely ancient history:

Remember the Lord your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous in order to establish the covenant he made with your ancestors—and that's how things stand right now.³

Right now. Any strength, any hope, any redemption we receive, Moses insists, comes from God. This was true for our ancestors thousands of years ago. And it is true for us now. As other scholars have noticed:

¹ Thank you, Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin.

² Marc Olson and Joann Post for the *ReMember* worship series from Worship Well.

³ Deuteronomy 8:18, Common English Bible

Throughout Deuteronomy, the author repeatedly employs the word ‘the day’...meaning ‘this day’ or ‘today,’ [which is] a way of making these ancient sermons from Moses ‘liturgically present’ for every hearer/reader – be they sitting in exile beside a canal on the Euphrates or listening from the back pew in [Concord]. This is not simply a recitation of well-trod history; the message matters now, where the danger of forgetting our past and losing our connection to God and God’s will is urgent and imminent and affecting our neighbors near and far, human and nonhuman.⁴

These words from Moses are not simply crusty dusty sentiments from a land long ago and far away. When the threat of civil unrest looms unlike anything we have witnessed in generations, when a 15-year-old goes on a shooting spree in a cul-de-sac in Raleigh, when teachers are resigning in tidal waves, I think it is safe to say that we could use a word that speaks to us now. The same can be said for times when the promotion comes through, when the marriage is strong, when the children are nestled safely in their beds, when retirement really does bring with it a new beginning. In good moments and bad, on rough days and in banner seasons, it is God—and God alone—who holds us steady and enables us to stand at all.

Moses will not be with the people in the Promised Land. He will not be there to remind them repeatedly who and whose they are. Yes, they will be tempted to worship other gods when things are unsettled. In desperate moments, they will be tempted to grab and grasp at anything within reach to keep from drowning. When all is going well, gangbusters even, they will be tempted to forget God and God’s faithfulness too. They will begin to wonder if they need God at all. And they may very well find themselves perched in a precarious spot, on top of a mountain they are convinced they climbed purely on their own or they may begin to think they created the

⁴ Olson and Post

mountain themselves. It may not be Mt. Stupid, it may take the form of Mt. Arrogance, Mt. Foolish, or even Mt. Amnesia. And their foolishness, their forgetfulness, their arrogance will be their ruin.

It is crucial that we do not fall into the trap of blaming the victim. Not all of the Israelites are guilty of losing sight of the One who whisked them away from Egypt on eagles' wings. Many suffer the consequences of arrogant or rash decisions made by those in charge who begin to think more highly of themselves than they should. That is the last thing Moses wants. And it is the last thing God wants.

So how do we keep from getting stuck on those mountains? Adam Grant suggests that the key is humility. He writes:

Humility is often misunderstood. It's not a matter of having low self-confidence. One of the Latin roots of humility means 'from the earth.' It's about being grounded—recognizing that we're flawed and fallible.⁵

I don't agree with Mr. Grant entirely. Yes, we are flawed and fallible; "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," as Paul reminds us. And yet, grounded means more than admitting our limits and our frailty. Humility is grounded in the good news that we cannot do it all on our own AND we are not expected to. We do not free ourselves from slavery nor do we usher ourselves into the Promised Land. We live and move and have our being in God, the very God one theologian describes as "the Ground of Being."⁶ No matter where we go, no matter how far we wander, no matter how far afield we may find ourselves, God is here, and God remains faithful, calling us back to Godself, ready to remind us of the ground rules we signed on to in that covenant we agreed to at the foot of the mountain.

⁵ Adam Grant, *Think Again* (Viking: New York, 2021) 46.

⁶ Paul Tillich

As a teenager, I dreaded being grounded; I flinched at the very thought of having my wings clipped. Nashville had a city-wide curfew, or so our parents insisted. The rule at our house was that my brother and I had to get home in plenty of time to enable the person driving us to get home before midnight. In other words, if my date got in trouble for arriving home after midnight, I could be grounded. And that sounded awful and terrifying. Being grounded was the last thing I wanted.

Billy Graham was known to say, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” And at the foot of the cross, no one is higher than Jesus, the one who gives himself to us and for us, revealing the lengths—or the depths—to which God is willing to go to save us. We cannot save ourselves, and lest we forget, we need saving, prone to wander as we are. And every single one of God’s beloved children needs saving and every single one of us stands on equal footing at the foot of the cross, too—those who live in the penthouse and those who dwell in the cellar and everyone in between. The ground is level there, for everyone. So, when I plant myself on any of those mountains, when I begin to believe that I have all the answers, that I know all I need to know, it is good and right for me to remember where I stand, to recall who in fact is the giver of the air I breathe and the ground beneath my feet. God’s grounding is not about boxing me in or clipping my wings; God is my foundation, the very ground of my being, the solid rock on which I stand both in the land of milk and honey and in the depths of exile and every place in between.

Much of who God is remains a mystery; God’s guidance is not. Love God; love neighbor. Worship God above all else. Rest, and allow others to rest, too. Tell the truth, even when the truth is not easy or pretty. Take care of those who need taking care of, attending to those on the edges, on the margins. Do not waste energy on envy, resenting what others have. When the wilderness stretches out before us, it helps to remember that we have been here before, and that

we are not alone now, just as we were not alone then. And when we find ourselves on top of a mountain, it is good and right to give thanks to the God who gives us rules and roots, the God who gives us strength and makes it possible to make the climb, the God who claims us both at the summit and after we tumble back down. The great good news is this: at the pinnacle of the mountain and in the depths of the valley and on every path in between, we're grounded.

Thanks be to God. Amen.