

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

Ex 34: 1-12 **“God’s Story, Our Stories”** (10/23/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace with you!

We watched the scene two weeks ago here on TV. It was the last scene we watched – in view of the river Jordan Moses, alias [ae-lies] Charlton Heston, hands over his heritage and leadership. He will not cross with his people into the Promised Land.

Today we read about this scene. Let us read together what belongs to us – the sermon text for today, Deuteronomy [due –de-ró-nēmi] chapter 34, the first 12 verses. The headline for this text is: **“Moses Dies and Is Buried in the Land of Moab”**.

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will

give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.' ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

AMEN.

We all hear a text like this differently. Depending on our current situation, our emotions and knowledge we approach the text I different ways. The same text can speak to us in another context

differently. Today I have only one question to you, with which I would like to open the text for us.

Which part of the text speaks to you and why?

We all yearn for a Promised Land. We all hope that there is a Promised Land for us. We hope, that God has a call for us and that we can see at the end of our days the sense of our life, the reason, why God has called us into live.

I know women, who long for a child – but have because of their medical conditions or the lack of a partner at this point no chance of realization. For those women a child would be like entering the Promised Land.

I know men, who long for a stable partnership. They do EVERYTHING to find a woman – they do sports and open up a profile on match.com. For those men a partner would be like entering the Promised Land.

For Israel as group the Promised Land was also a very real dream. The dream for an own Land. We can dream, hope and wish as individuals as wells as a group of people.

We are people on a journey. We don't stop dreaming. We always set goals – and if it is to have no goals anymore. This yearning, this fire

belongs to us. It is essential part of our human character. This longing for becoming more than we are is part of the birth gene of this country. Whoever immigrated into this country came because of a dream. Inclusive myself. Our families dream, we all dream. For a better life. For independence, for a good living standard, for peace, for justice.

The same dreams, which helped the Israelites to survive 40 years in the desert helped to form this country. People of faith formed this country as they did in Israel. It is the God of our Hebrew-Christian Tradition, who is so earthly, so human, so close to us. This is curse and blessing – because we don't know what God's will is. We need many prayers and discernment among ourselves – and even then we cannot be sure.

What would Moses see today, if God would show him now again the land God showed him so long time ago? Has the peace he dreamed about become true? Has the justice he dreamed about become reality?

Yes, Israel got now its own state. The first one was a kingdom and was founded 1000 Before Christ. Its first king was Saul. The second got founded 1948, 63 years ago. But what happened with the hope, the dream the Israelites had, when they left Egypt, wandered first 40 years through the wilderness and had to live later for more than 2000 years in oppression and scattering all over the world?

Where is Israel today? Israel is today in all respects a broken country. If you followed the news you heard that social protests have shaken the land as food prices and rents are meanwhile so high that even middle class people have to struggle. Is the Promised Land, which was promised by God? Last week Israeli Gilad Schalit got exchanged for over 1,000 Palestinians – Israel still has no peace. Is this the Promised Land, which was promised by God?

Are our hopes and dreams built on sand? Was Israel mistaken to believe in God's promises? What are God's promises worth?

The answer is as simple as challenging. It is like so often: God's justice and will for us is simply often not what we WANT to hear. Israel thought: Now we cross the river Jordan and everything will be fine. ... And yes, sure, for the first generation, maybe the first GENERATIONS it was exciting to build up a country. As it must have been for our families, when they came to this country. Nothing is more exciting than helping to build up a new society. Nothing is formed, no limits, you are free to form a common welfare for yourself. All these debates! Which kind of chances! Not often a society is able to form itself. And whoever had the chance to participate in this process is proud, has the right to be proud!

Both things sound familiar to us: The excitement to build up a country, but also the sober observation that our country is divided in 2 big blocks – even so many believed or still believe that this would be the Promised Land. ... You as a congregation have gone through struggles, among yourself, with ministers, when you became ONA. God's Promised Land?

Last week I learned something about you. It was Elice [Elci] who said that the people we meet change our lives. Nothing moves more than to allow others to touch us - and to change us therewith. When we are open for relationships than we are able to find ourselves. The women, who long for a child, the men, who look for a partner – they all want to get liberated to themselves. But there is no self-liberation. Liberation can happen –like forgiveness- only through another person.

As congregation you are theologically diverse. Some of you are rebels, calling for social and political change. Others among you don't want to talk about politics at all, but are very spiritual, going to the hospital, holding hands, praying. And again others try to do both. What brings you TOGETHER, is God's call. You might disagree on how to understand the scriptures, but you are together in the pews, in making soup and serving others.

Israel has the right-wing settlers in the West Bank, who believe that God's promise gets fulfilled by their occupation. But Israel has also

the Kibbuzim, in which left-wing people see God's will happen, when they share living, work and wealth together.

Leading a diverse group of people was never easy. Not for Moses, not for me as an Interim. But it is also not easy for a congregation itself to be theologically diverse. But diverse is also this country and so is Israel.

So what is God's call us? The answer lies in what Elice [Elci] described last week: In recognizing each other and to allow others to touch us. The answer lies in the openness to each other, the willingness to listen to each other, to get touched by others and not to limit this listening and getting touched to ourselves, but to open it to really everybody in the world. This might be the highest standard we can have on earth. Because it requires to accept that we will never be able to see the fruits of our doings --- as we know: So big the tasks, but so short our own live. This it is what we share with Moses, who was called to lead and to see the Promised Land, but was not allowed crossing the river Jordan with his people.

We are called to lead and to fight for our God-given values. For God and our children and our children's children. In our living, praying and doing we are hopefully able to see God's Promised Land. But we will not get into it for ourselves. We will find our peace finally only with God when we will have crossed another border, from which there is no return. What we do on earth we do for God. Selfishness is not part

of our faith --- only deep love and empathy for everything, which lives on earth and has a right to live in dignity. Everybody, everything. Without exception.

This radical INCLUSION of God's values for EVERYBODY makes us a UCC-church still pretty much unique. Even in these days. And it should make us proud as humble.

The character of sects is to seclude themselves from the world. But our God became flesh in Jesus. The character of a church is to be part of the world, witnessing the God of justice and peace in a world, which longs so much.

Whatever we can get on earth materialistic wise cannot feed our real longing. Even the Gods of this world tell us thousand times the opposite. (And I am sure that everybody here in the sanctuary, who has some life experience, will confirm this!) Israel got its Promised Land, but has not found since then its peace as it was not able to find justice and peace with its neighbors. Also we cannot find OUR peace until justice and peace as been achieved for everybody. And this applies for our private lives as well our beings as world citizens.

It is God's promise to be with us. God had a story with Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Now God has a story with us. Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail! For God's joy! AMEN