

MISSION POSSIBLE: MISSION AS A WAY OF LIFE

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

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There is always orientation. Whenever you begin anything new. Freshman year of college, there is orientation for the students, and these days, also, orientation for the parents, so that they can be reminded not to hover too much.

The first day of a new job there is always orientation, whether you work for a Fortune 500 company or a small business, a five-star restaurant or a fast-food place.

At church, we have Inquirer's classes for those interested in learning more about church membership.

At orientation, you learn about the culture of an organization. You learn about expectations. You learn, "This is what it means to be a student here, an employee here, a member here."

The people of Israel have been wandering for 40 years. They have been following Moses who has never let them down. Oh, they grew weary. They grumbled, they murmured, they fought among themselves, and from time to time, they flirted with other gods. But every step along the way, Moses was their guide, and God, they knew, was guiding Moses and them. Through Moses, they receive God's commandments. When there's no food anywhere, manna appears to feed them. And finally, they have arrived. They can see the promised land from where they're standing. But before they walk into their new home, Moses stops them and speaks to them, reminding them of who they are and what values they are to embody in their new home.

We are not to hear today's scripture as a word-for-word speech given by Moses; it didn't happen that way. But the intent is nevertheless the same. The book of Deuteronomy is a new interpretation of the law, given to the people of Israel to remind them how they are to live.

Think about our Constitution, and the Supreme Court's role in interpreting it anew given changing circumstances. If a question comes up, say, about internet privacy, something that obviously was not mentioned in the Constitution, how do the judges rule on it? They go to the original document and try their best to determine its intent. What kind of a society did our founders want?

The same is true of biblical interpretation. When we try to decide how we should act, what choices we should make, whether something is biblical or not, we look at the themes that appear over and over again in the Bible. Don't pick out one random verse. Look at the whole, and see which values are reiterated.

Our passage for today is one of those foundational, central passages which remind us of God's intent for us as communities of faith.

God cares about justice, especially for those who have the least, especially for those who are the most vulnerable. Three categories of people are mentioned in particular: orphans, widows, and strangers. These three are mentioned frequently together in the Old Testament, because their survival depended entirely on the mercy of others. There was no social safety net in that patriarchal culture for those who had lost the protection of the male members of their family. There was no Social Security, no welfare benefits, not even a means for them to make their own money. The same is true for those who find themselves far from home - strangers, exiles, aliens, immigrants. Throughout the psalms, the words of the prophets, and the laws given to the people of Israel, we see God

reminding them that a hallmark of their life together is that the resources and energies of the strong will be committed to the well-being of the weak and vulnerable.

Here is Psalm 68, verses 5-6:

Father of orphans and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.
God gives the desolate a home to live in...

and here is Psalm 146:9 -

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow...

The practical outcome of God's command is that there is a social covenant community, a neighborly network that sustains people who cannot sustain themselves.

Last week when we began our "Mission Possible" series, I told you that your mission was to ponder the interconnectedness of humanity. We talked about Paul's image of the church as the body, and how we can begin to learn about our interdependence here, in the church, and then practice it in our neighborhoods, in the world, on the planet.

This week, building on that, your mission - should you choose to accept it - is to carry in your heart and mind this question, "Who are the most vulnerable, and what can I do to care for them?"

In biblical times, it was always this triad: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger — also called sometimes alien or immigrant - the widow, the orphan, the immigrant: three groups for whom no one was required to provide. Three groups that lived, quite literally, at the mercy of others.

They are mentioned over and over again because God wants us to live in a community of well-being for all. The Hebrew word for it is “shalom” - a beautiful word that doesn’t have a perfect English equivalent. It means “peace” and “wholeness” and “well-being”. It is what we all want, isn’t it, for our world? And it is only possible when we make sure that everyone’s basic needs are met. In biblical times, it was widows, orphans and strangers who needed the most attention. Who would be considered the most vulnerable in our time? Who are those for whom our social support network is failing? Who are the forgotten?

And who is it who is within our sphere of influence to help?

I took a walk with a friend yesterday. We were talking about all of the places that have been devastated by the recent weather disasters - Texas, the gulf coast, Florida, the Caribbean. And how strange it seems sometimes to go on with our lives as normal, enjoying, ironically, this incredibly beautiful weather we’ve been given, going on little trips...but it hardly does any good to sit at home and fret about it all, does it? That’s hardly the point.

The point is...to develop a mindset that keeps in mind the needs of others, not so we feel guilty, but so that we will be more ready to act when we have the capacity and the opportunity.

“Who are the most vulnerable, and what can I do to care for them?”

The orientation of our minds and hearts determines everything about how we live. If what we are focused on is making as much money as we can, making ourselves as comfortable as we can, keeping as much of that money for ourselves, then our lives will be lived in a certain direction. That mindset will determine our decisions and actions. But if we have in mind a certain belief that what we want is a world of “shalom”, where all people are cared for, then we will make different decisions and we will behave in different ways.

“Mission” is not just a committee, a team in our church; it is a way of life. It isn’t just a one-week experience; it’s a mindset. It doesn’t mean we don’t take care of ourselves and our families but it means that we know the difference between our wants and our needs.

We live in uncertain times; maybe the times have always been uncertain. But this particular moment in history seems particularly fraught with anxiety. Bad news pervades, and we aren’t, as a whole, coping very well. Our children are showing signs of depression and stress overload. We’ve tried so many solutions. We’ve tried numbing ourselves, whether through constant entertainment or spending sprees or abusing any number of substances. We’ve tried distracting ourselves. Yet the anxiety keeps creeping in. You think you’ve locked it out, that your security system is foolproof, yet there it is in your bedroom at 4 AM.

What if we tried God’s method? Living with an open-hearted love for the most vulnerable? Keeping in mind what we can do to help others?

This church is becoming known as Mission Central, our way of saying that if you are looking for a way to make a difference, we want to make it easy for you. Whether you want to work right here, making meals for our own members, helping with transportation...or whether you want to work with one of our mission partners, we will help connect you in any way possible.

It doesn’t have to be your whole life, ALL your money, ALL your time. But you just might find that it is the WAY of life that helps all of the other pieces of your life fall into place.