Reformed and Always Being Reformed; Deut 34:1-12— Pent 22A; Reformation Sunday
Second Presbyterian Church
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Today's scripture, like our lessons from the last several months, is set in the ancient Hebrew Bible. After forty years of wandering in the desert, the Hebrew people have journeyed to the edge of the promised land. Listen to what the Spirit might be saying to us as I read from Deuteronomy 34, verses 1-12.

Scripture

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 Moses 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 Moses, '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 vigor 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.

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

10 Never 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.

Sermon

Harry Levinson, an American psychologist, once said, "All change is loss, and loss must be mourned."

In the book The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why, Phyllis Tickle, a contemporary Episcopalian theologian, develops a very interesting

thesis: "the contemporary Church stands in the midst of a once-every-500-year re-formation."[1]

> She suggests that the three previous moments [of reformation] in church history are: 1) the rise of the Monastic movement…in the 500's, 2) the split between the east and west branches of the church near 1000AD, and 3) the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s…The result of these movements is a reaction against the hierarchy of the church, and [each time] a new form of church emerges.[2]

Now, main line Christianity seems on the verge of another re-formation challenging the church hierarchical system.

In our Scripture passage today, God takes Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo and shows him the land God promised to Moses' ancestors. Moses could see it, but he will never enter it because of his disobedience to God. God tells Moses that God will fulfill the promise made to the Moses' ancestors. God will give the children of Israel the land promised, but Moses will not be with them. A new leader, Joshua, will lead the people into the promised land, not Moses. A 500-year re-formation? Possibly.

In 1517 the Catholic Church had the corner on the market as far as churches go. They were the only game in town, and everyone had a membership in their local parish. The priests were just about the only people who were educated, with the exception of a few extremely wealthy landowners. The vast majority of people couldn't read and were completely dependent on the clergy for spiritual guidance. Most people attended mass regularly to receive the Sacrament of Penance because they needed to be absolved of their sins by the clergy. This Sacrament of Penance became a way for corrupt clergy to demand money for the absolution of sins, often from those who made very little money in their livelihood.

Along comes Martin Luther, a Catholic insider, a monk, and a scholar who spent most of his life in a Catholic monastery. Although he questioned many of the practices and misuses of authority of the Catholic Church, Martin Luther never wanted to leave or dissolve the Catholic Church; he wanted to work within the system to reform it. His 95 Thesis, nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, was simply a list of questions and propositions for debate about what Luther felt were improper and often corrupt practices in the Catholic Church.

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[1] Kara Martin, "The Great Emergence—Phyllis Tickle," 7/5/09 from Sydney Anglicans website, https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/the_great_emergence_phyllis_tickle accessed 10/28/23.
[2] Ibid.

Phyllis Tickle suggests there are three things that [are] challenged roughly every five hundred years, [but I'd like to focus on just one of them], what has authority for Christians?[3]

In this period of the Reformation of the 16th century, Martin Luther challenged the authority of the clergy and refocused authority on Scripture.

The growth of the Reformed movement was swift. John Calvin broke off from the Catholic Church to form the Protestant movement. Calvin's belief in the priesthood of all believers was a direct response to the corruption of the Catholic clergy and Calvin's disdain for the Pope. Authority to access God no longer rested with only the clergy, according to Calvin and the Protestant movement. Anyone could ask God for their own forgiveness.

If we go back to that quote, "all change is loss, and loss must be mourned," what did we lose as Christians in the Reformation of the 1500s? The church certainly split into many factions and continues to split to this day. Some would say the church could no longer control the masses. Others might say authority was undermined. But who can safely claim to have the authority of God or not?

In the time of Moses, God took that authority from Moses and handed it to Joshua to lead the people into the promised land. It was clear who had the authority and who did not, and the people mourned the loss of the only leader they had ever known. It was a time of uncertainty.

The Church today is certainly in a period of change and uncertainty. Are we asking "what has authority for Christians?" as Phyllis Tickle suggests?

Some might say that our society is challenging everything about authority that we've ever known. We no longer trust the government to keep us safe, or corporations to keep us employed, or politicians to tell the truth. If the church is like any of those, we can't trust it either. Now we are encouraged to trust only ourselves and the few people in our circle who think just like us. But that thinking is not compatible with Christianity. Christianity is communal, it is loving neighbor as self, it is giving in response to God's gifts to us. What has authority for us, as Christians?

If we can't trust government or corporations or politicians, don't we need the community, the love, and the people in our church more than ever? Don't we need something/someone we can hold onto in the midst of difficult times? Don't we need God to turn to?

Moses did not enter the promised land, but God chose Joshua to be a new leader who was "full of the spirit of wisdom." Joshua did take the people into the promised land. God was and is faithful to God's people.

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[3] Ibid.

Even if we are entering a period of re-formation in the church, it doesn't mean the church is going away, and it certainly doesn't mean that God has abandoned us and is no longer leading us. Notice that quote at the top of your bulletin, "The church reformed, always being reformed," according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. God is always working, moving, directing, guiding us for the good of God's world and the good of God's church. Always re-forming us for leadership if we would just pay attention and trust God. The worst thing that could happen is for us to stay the same, to stagnate, to be changeless in a world that is rapidly changing. What or who has authority for you?

Perhaps that quote by Harry Levinson should be changed. Perhaps it should read, all change is good, and goodness must be celebrated." The church must change in a changing world. Let us hold fast to the certainty that God walks with us amidst the change. God knows what we are and what we will be no matter how many re-formations the church may experience.

Thanks be to the God of Moses and Joshua, Martin Luther and John Calvin, and the Spirit in God's church. Amen.