

Order of Service – April 9, 2017
My Purgatory

Musical Prelude – Where Is It Written?

*Greeting – My Purgatory**

1st Hymn: “Praise be to God, the Almighty” Green 19

Reading 1: – “In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.” – Dante

Reading 2: – “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes.” – Proust

2nd Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar,” Green 290

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer– Psalm 19, a Psalm of David

3rd Hymn: “I Sing the Mighty Power of God,” Green 9

*Pastoral reflection or message**

Silent worship

4th Hymn: “The Trees of the Field,” Green 335

Benediction – “The Lord Bless You and Keep You; The Lord Make His Face to Shine Upon You, and be Gracious Unto You; The Lord Lift Up His Countenance Upon You, and Give You Peace.” – Numbers 6: v. 24-26.

Afterthoughts/Thank yous/ Introductions /Announcements/

Postlude

Greeting: Good morning, Friends. The music we just enjoyed is called, “Where Is It Written?” and comes from the film, “Yentl.” If you are not familiar with this movie, released in 1983 and starring Barbra Streisand, the story begins with these words: “In a time when the world of study belonged only to men, there lived a girl who dared to ask, ‘Why?’”

Late on the evening of November 8, 2016, I too asked, “Why?” In times of trouble in my life, in moments when I lose a sense of what’s happening, when my ignorance leaves me fearful, I often turn to books. Months before in the summer, half-joking, I had said that if Donald Trump won the Presidency, I would go into a self-imposed purgatory. Then, it had happened. I was raised Protestant, so the concept of Purgatory is not something I mean literally. I mean it as a metaphor, as a “between” time of seeking for answers, trying to get myself from “here” to “there” through reading. It should be a challenge, a bit of a struggle. So I scanned my bookshelves, especially where I keep the books I’ve always meant to read someday.

This is My Purgatory: the Old Testament. Dante’s “The Divine Comedy.” Back to the Bible for the Book of Revelations. Then maybe something a little lighter, perhaps Solzhenitsyn’s “The First Circle,” or maybe Proust’s “The Remembrance of Things Past.”

So here I am, still in the early part of my Purgatory travel, and in a few minutes I am going to go “all Old Testament” on you! I do so humbly, and lightly, because after all, this is my first read-through, my first burrowing into the passages on either side of the famous tales of Noah’s Ark, David and Goliath, and Jonah in the belly of a whale. Some of you have read the O.T. before, perhaps several times; some of you are reading it now; some of you, like me, know the big stories from childhood but may have forgotten a lot of it. Some of you may be of Jewish heritage and belief, and so for you the Christian Old Testament comes from the Torah and other sacred writings. Please be gentle with me in your listening. My message today is not on the Old Testament. That would be a foolish attempt for a 7 to 10 minute portion of sharing time. Rather, it is a message about my experience of reading the Old Testament from the beginning, and well on my way to the end, for the first time.

Prayer

Psalm 19, a Psalm of David

Benediction

“The Lord Bless You and Keep You; The Lord Make His Face to Shine Upon You, and be Gracious Unto You; The Lord Lift Up His Countenance Upon You, and Give You Peace.” – Numbers 6: v. 24-26.

Message:

Since November 2016, I have once again embarked on a journey through the storied landscapes and times of the Old Testament. I'm not on a tour bus stopping at the popular landmarks I've known since childhood. I'm traveling from dot to dot, but not tarrying as I go. This is not a deep study here, of supporting texts, maps and tables, concordances and indices, although I admit to some internet hunting and pecking. Viewed from a scenic overlook, the panorama of the Old Testament is the story of an ancient nomadic people who begin to slow down and try to stay put. From many lands and among many gods, they eventually settled in the land promised by the One God who chose them, and whom they chose. This Covenant between them may have started out as practical for the people. They chose a god who worked for them, delivering freedom from slavery, victory in battle, and the way to a new home. In return, they agreed to follow God's decrees and ordinances. As it says in Exodus 19, verses 4 through 6: *"You have seen how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*

I needed to keep this big idea in mind on my reading travels, because the way through the O.T. is messy. First, the people weren't so good at holding up their end of the bargain. Every time they got it right, they almost immediately got it wrong. When they got it wrong, God turned away. When they repented, God turned back again. Forty years' wandering in the desert was the first punishment for disobeying God; of all the people leaving Egypt, only the faithful Caleb and Joshua were permitted to cross into the Promised Land. Keeping up with the obeying and disobeying felt to me like going up a mountain through a series of tight switchbacks, one after the other, ten years this way, thirty years that way. Even after finally settling into the Promised Land, divided among the 12 tribes of Israel, and with their fine kings, David and then his son Solomon on the throne in the holy city of Jerusalem that David built, the Israelites got it wrong and were cast into exile and slavery in Babylon.

Perhaps part of the difficulty came with all those decrees and ordinances. There are so very many to keep up with, way more than the ten commandments! The principle of purity runs through many of them. God is pure, so the people must strive for purity to stay close to Him. Some make good sense, like being honest in business by keeping just measures for length or weight or quantity. Others seem puzzling or even bizarre, and still others are horrific to the modern-day reader. No one with a blemish or disability – there are twelve listed – may approach God’s altar. People aren’t the only ones who could get leprosy; so could clothing, and houses! The Sabbath must be kept pure and holy; breaking the Sabbath meant death by stoning. When two men are fighting and one man’s wife tries to protect her husband by grabbing the other man’s private parts, her offending hand must be cut off. Don’t sow a field with two kinds of seed, and don’t plow that field with an ox and an ass hitched together. When reading about which animals are unclean, another word for impure, I was charmed by the mention of the rock badger and the hoopoe bird. The bat is a bird, and unclean, but *among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those which have legs above their feet, with which to leap on the earth*. I love that, but I don’t think I want to eat a locust.

Family lines must stay pure, to a degree I found to be both tedious and squirmy. The tedious part: the genealogical listings go on and on, from the descendants of Adam to the twelve tribes of Israel. The squirmy parts: Abraham, the father of Israel, and his wife, Sarah, were half siblings. Incest pops up fairly frequently in the Old Testament, while marriage with foreigners was forbidden, because of the risk of taking up foreign gods. And then, squirmy becomes atrocious. Phineas, the son of Eleazar the priest, hefted a spear and ran through a man from the Hebrew tribe of Simeon and his Moabite wife with one blow. God rewarded Phineas with the everlasting priesthood. Keeping the people apart from foreigners was massively easier to obey when, making war with the residents of the Promised Land, the Israelites were instructed by God to slaughter every man, woman and child, all their animals and possessions, and burn their cities. Today, we call this genocide.

Yet the Old Testament isn't all vengeance, fire and brimstone. I found ideas tending toward mercy: the establishment of sanctuary cities; the year of Jubilee when slaves go free, debts are forgiven, and lands sold away decades before are returned to families; the compassionate practice of gleaning fields for what you need, leaving the rest for the poor and the widowed. There are even, in times when women were valued as 3/5ths of a man, the beginnings of justice. Men without sons may leave their inheritance to their daughters, not to a less closely related male relative.

When my reading brought me to familiar characters, my understanding deepened. I used to be a solid groupie for the rock star King David. Now I find Moses more intriguing. Numbers 12, verse 3 describes Moses as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth." Yet Psalm 106 remembers "how Moses, [the Lord's] chosen one, stood in the breach before [the Lord], to turn away his wrath from destroying [the people]." God and Moses converse together, face-to-face. Sometimes Moses complains about how hard it is, and God listens. More than once, God rages against his stiff-necked people, threatening to destroy them. Moses replies, in Exodus 32, "But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin – and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written." God's response? "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people." How extraordinary.

As I read through the hard and heavy parts, I found light touches in familiar names or images. A dear friend named her son Ethan, who now is finishing up a master's degree in Choral Conducting at the New England Conservatory of Music. She didn't know that Ethan appears in the Bible as a minstrel in the holy temple of Jerusalem. He even has his own psalm, #89. I enjoyed any references to trees, such as "the oaks of Mamre," the oak of rest for Abraham.

I found certain words notable for how they sound, and certain turns-of-phrase. "Cubit" is fun to say. It's an ancient length of measurement approximately the length of a man's forearm, about 18 inches. I like people's "going out and coming in" through the whole of life. I like the expression "round about", for pasturelands round about cities, or nations

round about Israel. I even cringed a little less, reading about the constant ritual animal slaughter at the temple, because the priests threw the blood “round about” God’s sacrificial altar. I like mysterious words, like “ephod,” which turned out to be a priestly garment, or “urim and thummim,” which were black and white stones the high priest used to divine God’s will.

I am almost through the second Wisdom Book, Psalms, and will be crossing into the third, Proverbs. I hear that the fourth, Ecclesiastes, is popular. As I continue the journey through My Purgatory of the Old Testament, I look forward to more mystery, more reflection, and more moments of the familiar for a little mental repose. And I’ll remind myself that in searching for understanding, a small and finite person like me walks through a vastness I will never comprehend. Sometimes it is good to sit still, and listen.