

ALL THAT I HAVE COMMANDED YOU
Rev. Jim Lowry
Transitional/Interim Pastor, Oakland Ave. Presbyterian Church

Deuteronomy 5:4-21
Matthew 28:16-20

*God in three persons,
blessed trinity.*

It is one of those notions of the faith
that is slippery.
You have to ease up and grab hold
or it will get away...

get away or lie in the dust heap of unexamined memory.

Hold those thoughts.
We will get back to them in a minute.

The world did not change much in those days;
or if it did,
we did not know it very much.

We were seven or eight years old at the time...
maybe nine
but no more than nine years old.

There were five of us...
three boys and two girls...
all scrubbed
and all well rehearsed.

For me
the rehearsal had been beside my Grandmother Lowry's porch rocker.

The first six questions of the Shorter Catechism
were our assignment.

Questions one through three had gone well.

We had said that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever...
things like that.

It was time to move on to question four.

"What *is* God?"

Ms. Pearl Ravenel¹ asked each of us one at the time
putting emphasis each time on "*is*."

Ms. Pearl Ravenel was our teacher.

She wore a black dress
with little white dots all over it

¹ Though I changed her name, Ms. Pearl Ravenel is a real person.

and with white buttons all the way down the front
and a white belt around the middle.

"God is a Spirit,....infinite,eternal, andunchangeable,
in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and.... truth,"
we each answered in turn
with various levels of halting fits and starts.

"Good," said Ms. Pearl
standing before us in the classroom.

The Classroom was carved from the balcony
of the Seneca Presbyterian Church.

Movable petitions
came out of the walls or ceiling or some place...
designed so the Sunday School rooms
could be used for overflow crowds in the sanctuary
like at weddings and funerals.

Mrs. Pearl put a star on each of our cards
in the blank beside question four
indicating we had all gotten it right.

*God in three persons,
blessed trinity.*

Remember, now,
we are sneaking up on the notion
lest it slip away
or become too

obscure.

The world is changing faster now
than it was then,
or so it seems to me.

There once was a certain hill
out in the country from Seneca
that looked out over what we called the bottoms.

When we were children
we would go with my Grandfather Lowry
on spring days just as the red earth there
was beginning to warm.

We could look in all directions
and count as many as twenty mules
each pulling a plow on my grandfather's land.

Counting mules is the way my grandfather taught us our numbers.

That has all changed now.
Now,

as I have occasion to ride on I-85 around Seneca and Clemson
and cross the bridges over the fingers
of what is now Lake Hartwell,
I confess
I feel a little resentful
of the boats I see there
darting to and fro
over what was once plowed by generations of Lowrys...
Lowrys, their family, and neighbors.

We lose something when we lose touch with the land.
For me it is largely a matter of longing for the good old days.
Once for the people of God, however,
losing touch with the land
was much more important than notions of nostalgia.

In fact,
losing touch with the land
is likely what gave rise to the book of Deuteronomy.
Almost everyone who wonders agrees
that grand old book of the Old Testament
was not written in its present form
until many, many, many years after the events
of the story it tells.

In fact,
some of it was probably passed down by word-of-mouth
for generations
before it was written at all.
Other parts,
laws and things like that,
may have been written here and there
in bits and pieces
to be preserved
and used by the people of God;

but it was not until later
that the pieces were collected and put together
to resemble anything like the Deuteronomy we know today.

According to some experts,
Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons...²
sermons based on familiar material
put together for the people of God...

at a particular time of trouble.

² Gerhard von Rod, *Deuteronomy*, Westminster, 1966. 23

Was it some crisis in the family of God
like now
when there is burning controversy
before almost every denomination
including our General Assembly?
Was it some emergency in the nation
like now
when we are at war,
our staunchest allies are not coming to our aid
and confidence in the institution of government is eroding?
Was it a time of some great erosion of the values
like now
when there seems to be no moral compass

for anyone
and everyone is wondering what is going wrong?

No one knows for sure,
but from the material itself
there is one point on which almost every expert agrees.
Almost every expert agrees
Deuteronomy was put together at a time

when the people were losing touch with the land...

the land
but even more than the land,
they began to lose touch with what the land represented.

Missing the land
was far more than the wistful remembering
of a pleasant childhood.
The land represented to them
the promise and presence of God.³
In effect, they had lost touch
with the promise and presence of God.

Remember, now,
we are sneaking up
on a matter of consequence to the faith.
We call it the doctrine of the Trinity.

Hold those thoughts.

As I said,

³ *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. May, General Editor, Harper and Row, 1988. 209 f

things did not change much back then
or so it seemed to me.
My father had recited the Shorter Catechism to Ms. Pearl Ravenel
in that same classroom maybe as much as twenty-five years earlier.

"Very well done," said Ms. Pearl Ravenel
after she had put a star beside question four
on all of our cards.

"Now, let's move on to question five".
A wisp of gray hair came from beneath her black straw hat.
The hat had a silk rose fastened to one side.
We breathed a sign of relief.
As everyone who has recited the Shorter Catechism knows
question five is easy.

"Are there more Gods than one?" she asked
holding up one bony finger.

All of our hands went up at the same time.
We all knew that one.
In turn, we all answered,

"There is but one only, the living and true God."

Things were simpler then,
or so it seemed to me.
We cannot go back though,
can we?

What a buffoon I would be
to paddle my canoe to the middle of Lake Hartwell,
stand wobble-legged in that wobbly craft,
shake the paddle at the boaters and shout,

"It's mine...
mine and my brothers and cousins
and we are going to pull the plug on Lake Hartwell
and when it is drained and dry
we are going to plow these red hills again
with as many as 20 mules."

We pave the parking lots
as, indeed, the parking lot must be paved...I suppose...
and we build elaborate new high-rise buildings
and pipelines to crisscross the landscape to bring fuel for homes and vehicles
as, indeed, new buildings and pipelines need to be built...I suppose,
but the land is changed forever.

They burn the rain forests
as, indeed, we should not,
and it has gone forever
as the land sinks deeper into the sea
and the atmosphere becomes more and more troubled.
There is no going back.
If that is not the way it should be,
it surely is the way it is.

But the issue for the people of God
is more basic even than the ecology of the land
and much, much more basic than the nostalgia of it.
The question for the people of God is this:

If we cannot go back to the way things were
how now
do we keep on touching the promise and presence of God?

We are closing in on something important here.

*Blessed trinity...
arguably the most compelling doctrine of the 21st Century.*

But, then, that comes later.
We are still in the Old Testament,
and we are apt to be here for a while longer.
The notion of trinity did not come until after the New Testament;
and then it is not at all clearly defined in that Testament
as we mostly like our doctrine to be defined.
In fact, one would have to say,
it is not at all *defined* in the Bible.

If Deuteronomy is a collection of the sermons
put together for the people of God when they were in trouble,
hear what the long ago preachers had to say:
The long ago preachers said,
"When your world is changing, remember,
you shall have no other gods before me;
When your world is moving fast, remember,
you shall not make for yourself a graven image;
When you have lost touch with your roots, remember,
you shall not make cheap or profane the name of God;
When you have lost touch with what is right,
remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy;
When things are never going to be the same again, remember
to honor your father and your mother...your ancestors;
When your world is at its wits' end, remember,
you shall not kill;
you shall not commit adultery;

*you shall not steal;
you shall not bear false witness;
you shall not covet."*

That is what the long ago preachers thought we should remember
when in our world
we have lost touch with the promise and presence of God.
This is what they preached:

"When the world is changing...
when you cannot go back
and you need to know God is still present,
remember the command of the one holy God
whose command is to be heeded."

We are closing in on something important.

Indeed the world did change back then.
Between the time my father recited the Shorter Catechism to Ms. Pearl Ravenel
and I recited that grand old seventeenth century document to her
there were two world wars, a depression
and the boll weevil had its way with the south.
That is quite a lot of change when as an adult I think of it.
It's just that for me
the world seemed more stable then than now.

"That is very good,"
said Ms. Pearl Ravenel with enthusiasm
as she put stars on our cards.
"Everyone got that right, now let's go to question six."

We all sat stone still.
Number six was the question we all dreaded most:

"How many persons are there in the Godhead?"
she asked with a note of seriousness in her voice.

Except for Deloris,⁴
not a hand moved.
Deloris was well known as a showoff...
Miss Goody Two Shoes,
if you know what I mean.

"There are three Persons in the Godhead,"
answered Deloris
with an unbecoming self-righteous air,

⁴ Ditto Deloris to Ms. Pearl Ravenel.

"the Father,
the Son,
and the Holy Ghost..."

That was the easy part.
We all knew that much.
Then came the hard part.

"...the same in substance,
equal in power and glory."

Even for a nine-year-old who pays attention to words,
That made no sense.

Deloris was the only one
who got a star on question six that day.
She probably was not paying attention to the words...
or maybe she understood them.

Oh, I finally learned how to say the words.
My Grandmother Lowry saw to that.
I have to tell you, though,
I do not understand the words
any better now
than I did all those years ago.

The same substance, equal in power and glory?
I don't know what that means!
How you can be both three and one
is not something I understand.

But I must tell you one thing more.
While I have not come to understand the words,
the more my world changes,
the more I have come to understand
that the truth of those words
is somehow very, very important.

*God in three persons,
blessed trinity.*

As I understand it,
many Sundays at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church,
at one service or the other
and sometimes at both,
after the prayer of confession
and the assurance of pardon
and one verse of some doxology or other

one of the preachers stands here and says,

"Hear the word of our Lord Jesus Christ...."

What is going to happen next would be clear
even if it were not printed in the bulletin.

You know the custom well.

The sacrament of baptism is about to begin.

The preacher goes on to quote the words of Jesus
that by now every Presbyterian...every Christian...
must surely have committed to memory.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father (1)
and of the Son (2)
and of the Holy Spirit (3),
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded;
and lo, I am with you
even to the close of the age."

*All that I command...
All that I command...
With you always...
With you always...
Promise and presence...
Promise and presence....*

This is what Jesus Commanded
and this is what we must teach the nations
and the children:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted;
Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied;
Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy;
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the children of God."*

For Moses the command of God was law.

For Jesus the command of God was a blessing.
Dare we believe
 the law of God
 and the blessing of Jesus
 are variations on the same theme?
Dare we not believe such a thing?
For us the result is quite the same:

If in this changing world...
If in this world where we cannot go back to a safe place...
If *here* and *now*
 we are able to remember
 the command of the One Holy God (1)
 and the teaching and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ (2)
 then we will know the Spirit of God is present (3).

We have a great and lasting need to know,
 that we live under the watchful eye of the one Holy God
 whose command must be heeded;
We have a great and lasting need to know,
 everything that has ever gone wrong
 will one day be redeemed by the Redeemer in Bethlehem; and
We have a great and lasting need to know
 until that grand day,
 we live in the presence of the Spirit of God
 who beckons us to be participants in that redemption.

There is a crisis in the family of God
 where there is bitter controversy
 before almost every denomination
 including ours.

There is an emergency in the nation
 where we are alone and at war and our leaders are not trusted.

There is a disaster almost everywhere you look
 where there seems to be no moral compass for anyone.

We need now to know
 the promise and the presence of God.
There is no going back...
 we cannot return to a safer day...

 we must make this day safe.

This, then, is the day
 in which we must remember
 the command of the one God (1)
 as interpreted in the life and teaching and sacrifice of the Son (2)
 so that in this day we may know

the promise and presence of the Spirit of God. (3)

*One God in three persons,
blessed trinity.*

I still do not know exactly what that means,
but I have come to believe
the truth of it is very, very important.

James S. Lowry
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church
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