

Back to the Future

^{NRS} Deu 11:1 You shall love the LORD your God, therefore, and keep his charge, his decrees, his ordinances, and his commandments always.² Remember today that it was not your children (who have not known or seen the discipline of the LORD your God), but it is you who must acknowledge his greatness, his mighty hand and his outstretched arm,³ his signs and his deeds that he did in Egypt to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and to all his land.

^{NRS} Deu 11:18 You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Sometimes we know exactly who we are, don't we? We know exactly who we are and why God put us on this earth. But sometimes, sometimes we lose our way a little bit. Sometimes we find ourselves a little bit lost.

Dante knew all about this. He opens his great and somewhat autobiographical work The Inferno this way: "In the middle of the journey of my life, I found myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost." That's worth repeating I think. "In the middle of the journey of my life, I found myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost."

In the middle of his life, everything stops making sense. Nothing is clear and easy for Dante any more. No, everything get all tangled up and dense as the black heart of a dark, dark forest. In fact life becomes a kind of hell for Dante, so much so that he writes The Inferno, describing what it feels like for him to travel, at least figuratively, to hell and back.

And we know enough about Dante to know that The Inferno really makes a lot of sense given what was happening to him. Life really was pretty terrible for the guy. Born in 1265 in Florence, Dante was born into a large and important family, the Guelphs. Now, Medieval Italy being something like modern day South Carolina, they had a lot of what in Texas we'd call "a fussin' and a feudin'". Dante grew up with his family doing battle, and I mean literally battle here, with a family called the Ghibellines. But then something happened, somebody ran off with someone's cousin or huntin' dog or something like that, and the Guelph family itself split apart into White Guelphs and Black Guelphs and started tearing into one another. In 1302, when Dante is 37, the Black Guelphs seize power, and Dante, a White Guelph, is spared his life, but he's exiled from Florence. Now remember this is NOT a mobile society we're talking about here. People do not just up and move around in medieval Europe. You were born in one place, your family is there- you might travel, but for the most part you're really just going to live in that one place your whole life long. Hope you were born somewhere nice. Yeah, outsiders have few if any rights in foreign towns, so exile really meant something in those days. Really it's almost easier to be dead than to live as an exile in medieval Europe. So, three years before he begins work on The Inferno, Dante's family is defeated and in ruins, his political life is over, and he's exiled from Florence on the threat of being burnt alive (yikes); it's not hard to imagine him in that dark wood, standing in front of that enormous door bearing the words: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Yes, sometimes we lose our way a little bit. Sometimes we get a little bit lost.

And you know, it's not just as individuals we get lost, but sometimes an entire people can lose their bearings. The Israelites knew all about this- especially the folks who wrote our text this morning from Deuteronomy.

Now Deuteronomy is a sneaky book. On the surface it seems to fit just in fine with the other books in what's called the Torah, or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Old Deuteronomy. Like the others Deuteronomy tells the story of God liberating Israel from Egypt, and Moses delivering the law, and their journey through the wilderness. Traditionally it's believed that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, however, for about 100 years now scholars have been in wide agreement that the Pentateuch is actually written at different times and probably by different authors or even communities of authors. Just so you know it really doesn't take a Rhodes Scholar to figure some of this out, the first clue that Moses doesn't write the entire Torah is that he dies before it ends. You don't really need a Ph.d to figure out it's a pretty good bet that he didn't write that part.

Now one of the things scholars notice is that whoever wrote Deuteronomy, the language and style is very much different than the rest of the Torah, and it's a lot like Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. And so one of the things folks have figured out is that while much of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers really was written a long, long time ago, like anywhere between 1,200 and 1,000 years before Christ, Deuteronomy was written way after this- it was written nearly 500 years later in the reign of King Josiah in 622 and completed during the Babylonian exile.

So why was it written? Well during Josiah's reign the people of Israel were about as lost as they'd ever been. To begin with they were utterly divided. The people started

out with only judges, these leaders who were kind of warriors and priests all rolled up into one. Then, when Israel decided they wanted to play ball with all the other 5A teams, they decided they needed a king. And the Bible is really nervous about this, and with good reason. Kings, especially in the ancient middle east, kings had a nasty way of forgetting that their job was to carry out God's rule- not to pretend to BE God for the people. And you know what happens- it starts out OK with David and Solomon taking Israel to incredible heights, establishing a capital city in Jerusalem, expanding the borders, and building a glorious temple in Jerusalem. But then they went down hill...badly downhill. After Solomon died, all heck breaks loose. Like the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs the kingdom is divided against itself with Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Israel then fell to Assyria and becoming Samaria in 721 BCE. And then Judah ends up suffering a series of lousy kings, until they fell into exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Now the Deuteronomist, that's what we call the writer of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomist does an amazing thing here. In this terrible time, when Israel is almost at its lowest point, rather than just stick his head in the sand, he creates this amazing work. In fact without him it's possible the Jews would have died out in exile and been assimilated into Babylon like every other normal people. In this amazingly difficult time in exile, when their living as slaves again in Babylon and the people have absolutely forgotten who they are, don't even know where home is anymore, and certainly have no clue about what the future holds, when the temple has been destroyed- the temple that was the very symbol of the presence of God, it would just be easy to give up at this point right? But the Deuteronomist in the face of all this, decides even in exile Israel's story

isn't over. And he does an interesting thing- rather than write to them about Babylon and the present, or write about his hope for the future, he does something surprising- he writes about the *past*, the ancient past. He writes a history going all the way back to Israel's roots, when they did know who they were, and they knew God was with them.

He goes into the wayback machine and tells them about when they were in Egypt God didn't just leave them sit there, but God came down and delivered them. And it wasn't easy, they had a terrible journey through the wilderness, and they suffered from hunger and snakes and no water, but they did it together- and they survived. Heck, they not only survived but they thrived.

The Deuteronomist did what every great religious revival in the history of the world has ever done- in a time of confusion and uncertainty, he goes *ad fontes*, back to the sources, he goes to the roots of the faith to a time when the people had a better sense of who they were. And the cool thing with Deuteronomy is it isn't just ancient history to him. In fact this is one of the main differences between Deuteronomy and Exodus. The writer of Exodus records the giving of the law like it's history. But not Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy the past is put into the present tense. "Hear O Israel the statutes I am giving YOU TODAY!" In our text for this morning Moses tells the people, it's not to your children but YOU who must acknowledge his greatness. In Deuteronomy what happens in the past is what is still happening today- and it is what will lead us into the future.

And in our text this morning he does the coolest thing. He tells them to write all of this down, to mark it, to mark this time when they just knew without a doubt that God was in their midst, so that they could see this, touch this, during this time when it wasn't

as clear that God was with them- or even if God existed. Moses tells them to make mezuzahs- to mark their doors, so that every time they would enter and exit a door, they would kiss their finger and touch it to the mezuzah, as a way of remembering this time long ago when God delivered them.

And it's by doing this, it's by going to the past and remembering this time when things were better, remembering this time God was with them, Israel was able to hold on and sustain itself through Exile. And really, Israel didn't just survive exile, but in some ways it thrived. For instance the Hebrew Bible took its final shape in exile. With the temple destroyed, the Hebrew Bible, Israel had to have something to gather around- and it was around the Torah and in the synagogue that they found their new center.

Well, Dante, he does the same thing. You know most of us if we read Dante at all only read the Inferno. And we get so excited about Hell, the levels of hell, and definitely the torments (and some of them are pretty fun), but we get so focused on this it's easy to miss what's really going on. Remember the Inferno is just part 1 of a three part series, and unlike the Matrix, this triquel is good the whole way through. Part of what makes it great is that it's all connected. What connects it together? Well one theme, one person, really is constant in all three books and links them all together- Beatrice, a woman named Beatrice. When he's lost in the woods, it's Beatrice who sends Vergil to guide him. And then at the end, Beatrice actually shows up to walk him through heaven. The term Beatific vision actually comes from her name.

Dante met Beatrice when she was 8 and he was 9, and he instantly fell in love with her. He kept his distance, never wanting to do anything to taint this love. Then,

tragically, she married. And really what's a girl supposed to do- wait forever on a man she barely even knew existed and surely didn't know loved her with such depth? Her marriage was hard on him, but he carried on, even becoming married himself- although he never really fell out of love with her. She died young, and after her death, Dante committed himself to her memory- writing poem after poem about Beatrice. And then after the civil war, the feud, he finds himself exiled and life as he knows it over-figuratively going through hell, but helps him get through it all, what nourishes him in this dead place? His memory of Beatrice. His knowledge of this one pure moment in his life, when he loved another, not in a physical way, but in a pure way, a spiritual way, you might even say a divine way. It was this memory, this moment in time when he knew exactly who he was and all the good he was capable of- this is what he held on to and it sustained him.

How about you. I wonder for you if there is a time in your life you can point to when you just absolutely know in your heart that you were on the right path, that God was with you, that you knew who you were? I wonder for you if there's a time that's just bedrock for you, that no matter what happens, you can turn to it and say, I don't know where God is now in my life- but I know at least at that point God was with me?

For me there is. For me there is. I've shared with you all on several occasions that my relationship with my father wasn't easy or good. He was a hard man, an angry man. But I haven't told you that things weren't always easy with my mom, either. My father was so difficult to live with as a kid, that there was this naïve part of me that believed if we just got rid of him, then everything in our house would settle down and be

fine. I really wanted to believe that everything was his fault, right? And if we just got rid of them, things would be great. Of course, the truth was, life was better with my father out of the house, the threat of anger and violence didn't hang over everything- this was good. But my mom was now a single parent, something I'm more and more in awe of every day. And living with my dad for all those years- well it didn't do anything good for us. What happened to us is what, I've since learned, happens to so many families who suffer with verbal and physical abuse- when the angry person leaves, the people who are left, as strange as it sounds, fill the void. You know, when you're used to fighting, it's hard to learn how to lower your guard. And it didn't help that I was hitting my teen years and I was far from a shrinking violet. No, in the worst of it, my mom and I fought nearly as intensely as my mom and dad did. When I turned sixteen and I hit high school and started driving, it all came to a head. I started breaking curfew. My grades were suffering. And my mom and I hit a wall. On my end things came out of my mouth that today I can't believe I said- hateful things. Unforgivable things. And, I did the only thing I felt I could, I left home. From the Spring of my sophomore year to the Spring of my junior year in high school I lived with another family who took me in. My mom initially was going to call the police and force me back- but then relented. She made me agree to see a counselor with her and to meet her once a week. It was so hard at first. We had nothing to say to one another. But little bit, by little bit each of us began to heal and find our way again.

And then I remember one day, one amazing day. We met at Olive Garden, and she seemed different to me- more free, more alive than she'd seemed in years. And through tears she told me it had been a really hard year for her. A really hard year. She

said at first she just wanted me to come home and it consumed her. But she said she had now come to a different place. And she said the most amazing thing to me- the thing I needed to hear that I didn't even know I needed to hear. She said she no longer needed me to come home. She said if I needed to stay where I was, I could. And if I wanted to come home, that would be great. But that whatever I did, she loved me, and nothing I would ever do would change that. And something all hard and frozen up inside of me began to melt. Within two weeks I was back home. Though neither of us can prove this to anyone, my mom and I know that God was the ground of this. My mom found herself more capable of forgiveness than she really knew she was capable of. And I found myself able to hear her words and allow the spirit to soften my heart that had been as hard as a rock.

Sometimes we get lost. We do. And when that happens, the best thing to do is to look back, to look back and find those times when things were more clear, when we knew who we were, when we know God was a part of our lives. It doesn't fix everything, but it gives us somewhere to start from, a foundation to begin our rebuilding.

Israel put the story of Exodus on their doorposts. Dante his memory of Beatrice. Me- my mom in Olive Garden. What's on your doorpost? **Amen.**