

*October 23, 2011*

# ***“In Every Generation”***

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# In Every Generation

Deut. 34:5-12; Psalm 90; I Thess 2:1-9; Matt 22:34-46  
Pent 19 A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett  
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In every generation there tends to be “stand out” people who step up to the challenge of their time and provide clarity, leadership, assurance. We look for them. We want to be near people who see beyond what can be seen.

Moses didn’t think that way about himself. He was a murderer who had some kind of speech impediment. But if nothing else, he was obedient.

In Judeo-Christian theology and culture Moses is held up as one of those generational leaders. The writer of Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses.

Today the Old Testament reading tells about Moses’ death. He was very old, as the story goes, and he didn’t make it to the Promised Land. Up on Mount Nebo Moses is able to see Canaan below.

The text extols his virtues and the baton is passed to new leadership who will take them to Canaan.

This is a mythic story with a bigger-than-life character. And I think it provides us an opportunity to think about the theology of the story. Of course there is not just one theology running throughout the story, but I’m going to focus on one. That has to do with the question of whose land is this?

We learn from textbooks that the Hebrews, or the Israelites, were nomadic people - but when they arrived in the Promised Land they began to settle down. Now I wasn’t the best student there ever was, but I don’t recall my text books ever saying much about who was already living on that land. They didn’t address the problem of one group of people deciding they would move in and take over an already occupied land! The story tells us that God told Moses to do this, therefore it must be OK.

We discussed this in the Wednesday morning Bible Study and one wise participant said, “Well, you must remember that the story was written by the winners!” It was written from the point of view of the people who conquered the already existing community. It was a violent blood bath and the Israelites were the ones who prevailed and who told the story.

It made me remember how I felt, as a college student, when I learned that the history books we had in elementary and secondary public education were told from the point of view of the U.S. and didn’t include events that cast a shadow on our judgment or civility. For example the Japanese internment was conveniently left out.

It just so happened that I was a youth director in the early seventies in a Japanese American congregation. One Sunday morning I was teaching Senior High Sunday School and I started to make the statement that our ancestors came over from Europe. Before the sentence was half way out of my mouth my face flushed hot and I felt embarrassed at my own ignorance, for I was the only one in the room whose ancestors came from Europe.

I was sociology major at Cal State L.A. and so I quickly found a class I knew I needed to take: Racism and Asian American history, taught by Buck Wong. It changed my life. For the first time I learned about the internment of Japanese Americans. For the first time I learned about the 442<sup>nd</sup> regiment in World War II. I still have all the books from that class.

Then I also learned that the youth at church knew nothing about it either, and it was their parents who were in the camps – the Nisei generation. Their parents had internalized the culture’s shame in what had happened.

I think we have to do similar theological digging into our Biblical stories. OK, the Moses story is our story. But do we blindly accept it as the template for how we live in the world? Do we believe God wanted the Israelites to bludgeon to death the residents of Canaan?

Of course the answer is YES, that is exactly what we have believed as Christians and we have lived that out in how we have treated our sisters and brothers and our dear planet earth. Our earlier understanding of our relationship with the earth was that we humans were to have dominion over it and subdue it. We have done that well. We've nearly destroyed God's creation with an attitude it's ours to plunder as we see fit. The land is ours to kill for as we see fit.

More recently in Christian thought we have used the language of stewardship. We are stewards of God's creation. We are stewards of the land...not the owners of it. It is not ours to own.

But this whole notion of Moses' flock busting in on Canaan has shaped us. We repeat the pattern time and time again.

Are you familiar with the Sand Creek Massacre?

South East of Denver, CO is Eads which is near where the Sand Creek Massacre occurred. Nearly 150 years ago, troops led by Colonel John Chivington — a Methodist minister — brutally slaughtered occupants of a Native American village that was largely composed of women, children and the elderly.

Tensions between Native Americans and settlers grew after gold-seeking prospectors and settlers flooded into what became the Territory of Colorado in 1861. In the spring of 1864, U.S. troops killed Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear and burned the Cheyenne camps of Crow Chief and Raccoon.

After the Hungate family was killed on their ranch and their remains displayed in public in Denver, panic ensued and a new volunteer regiment of more than 1,000 men was recruited. The Cheyenne and Arapaho were told to make their way toward Fort Lyon if they wanted peace.

The encampment at Sand Creek was following those orders when it was surprised by musket and artillery fire on Nov. 29. Chief White Antelope, wearing a peace medal given to him by President Abraham Lincoln, was shot down, said historian David Halaas, and the American flag flying over the Lodge of Chief Black Kettle was ignored. "The soldiers had been told before they attacked to take no prisoners,"

Two junior officers who had tried to dissuade Chivington from his course of action ordered their men to stand down. But the rest of the cavalry attacked with a vengeance as they pursued the fleeing Native Americans. "The killing went on for five miles."

Chivington returned to his Annual Conference of Kentucky/Nebraska to serve as an elder when the war was over. Reparations were promised to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people which were never delivered.

The 2008 General Conference of our denomination voted to give \$50,000 to the National Park Service for the development of the Sand Creek Massacre Learning Center near the monument. There will be a service of repentance at the 2012 General Conference. <sup>i</sup>

It sounds disturbingly similar to the wars we are waging in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other places. And the Palestinian lands are the very same ones marauded millennia ago. The carnage and violation and sense of ownership continue today. Palestinian land is nearly non-existent. As Israelis mow down Olive Groves, a primary form of employment for Palestinians, is anyone asking about the impact on the environment? As Israeli settlements encroach around the remaining Palestinian land, agriculture is taken away. Where there used to be orchards there are now big white buildings with big white walls. Where once there was green and food and productivity there is now blinding white and dust.

Have you heard the term "American Exceptionalism?" It is the belief that God has chosen us to lead the world, and it's fast becoming the prerequisite for any candidate who wishes to become president of our country.

Andrew Bacevich of the Los Angeles Times wrote, "On what do politicians base their claims about America's divine role? Not the Hebrew Bible, and not the teachings of Jesus Christ. Instead, it appears to be part of some 'de facto Third Testament,' in which our military supremacy serves God's purposes."<sup>ii</sup>

Friends, I find this frightening. Not that we have a military, but the theology that says our military serves God's purposes. As Christians we must pay attention to this growing notion. As far as I'm concerned it is co-opting God and it's dangerous.

But the seeds are there in the Moses story.

Now listen, Moses has a lot to teach us about relationship with God, and leadership, and hardship. I'm not suggesting we throw the bum out. I am suggesting we use our gift of discernment as we think about our stories of faith. United Methodists are admonished to read the Bible with an understanding of the context in which it was written. That means we ask, "Who told these stories? Why did they tell them? For whom were the stories told?" Then we balance that with what else we know about God, especially the teachings of Jesus.

You know what pops up much more throughout Scripture? Justice! Inclusion! Love!

Yes, we read our faith stories with a critical eye and a discerning heart! And besides, Process theology says that we influence God as God influences us. And so we are all continually changing and growing in our understandings as we are in relationship with one another. Moses taught us that too!

George Packer in *Foreign Affairs* wrote: "Inequality creates a lopsided economy, which leaves the rich with so much money that they can binge on speculation, and leaves the middle class without enough money to buy the things they think they deserve, which leads them to borrow and go into debt. These were among the long-term causes of the financial crisis and the Great Recession.

"Inequality hardens society into a class system. Inequality divides us from one another in schools, in neighborhoods, at work, on airplanes, in hospitals, in what we eat, in the condition of our bodies, in what we think, in our children's futures, in how we die. Inequality saps the will to conceive of ambitious solutions to large collective problems, because those problems no longer seem very collective. Inequality undermines democracy."<sup>iii</sup>

Meet the great equalizer: Jesus Christ!!

Today's Matthew reading is a great example. The learned religious ones wanted Jesus to declare which law is the greatest. Rather than get caught in which "camp" Jesus identified with, he summarized the laws and teachings of the prophets with what we usually call the Great Commandment.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Brilliant!

The emphasis is not on following any particular law or rule or prophet, but rather on how you love God with your whole being! You see you have to use that wonderful gift of discernment to love God with your whole self.

Why discernment? Remember those idols?

Oh yes, we still make them. So we want to make sure we aren't loving something or someone that fools us into worshipping that which is not God. It's easy to do. So we take time in our lives to reflect and ask, is this loving and just? Does it care for God's creation? Does it care for the common good?

And then Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself. And by neighbor Jesus means your sister and brother human beings wherever they may be, whatever language they speak, whatever their social circumstances, they are our neighbors and we are their neighbors.

Mark Nepo wrote: “Rather than finding ourselves in everything, we are challenged daily to find everything in ourselves.”<sup>iv</sup>

Yes, we find our brother and sister human beings in ourselves. We find the oceans in ourselves, we find the earth and the plants and the animals and the air and star dust and solar rays in ourselves. We are connected and teeming with life.

Our desire is that God’s creation will still be teeming with life for future generations. How we love and work now determines that.

The great Pastor and teacher Howard Thurman wrote: “If people are to find a way of life that is worth living and make an act of faith toward themselves and others, then it follows that they must work for a society in which the smoking flax will not be quenched, nor the bruised reed crushed.

“For better or for worse we are tied together in the world. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

In every generation we will make mistakes. And in every generation God calls us to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

God has hope in us.

We have hope in God.

What more could we hope for?

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<sup>i</sup> UMNS By Linda Bloom Sept. 28, 2010 and By Deborah White April 30, 2008 | FORT WORTH, Texas

<sup>ii</sup> as quoted in *The Week*, Oct. 28, 2011

<sup>iii</sup> as quoted in *The Week*, Oct. 28, 2011

<sup>iv</sup> Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening*