

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Repentance: The Entire Life of Believers”
Matthew 22: 34-40; Deuteronomy 34: 1-12
October 29, 2017

Preaching on a text that is an account of a person working like crazy for 40 years and then being denied his much-anticipated retirement dinner of milk and honey in the Promised Land seemed, well, a bit off-putting, shall we say. Especially when one considers that just as Moses reaches retirement, he dies!

On the other hand, Moses *was* 120 years old! AND...“his vigor (wink! wink!) had not abated!”

So, I went with it.

Today is, of course, a milestone in my life. (Thank you for all the purple! I saw the copier spitting out purple bulletins on Friday, and I thought Advent had come a month early! But then somebody told me that the bulletins are purple because purple is my favorite color. Awww; that’s so sweet....as my friend and colleague Stephanie Rollans would say!)

Yes, today is a milestone for me. But in the rest of Protestantism, it is a milestone of a different sort.

All across Protestantism today, in churches large and small, my retirement is being eclipsed by celebrations commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Martin Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, German, which took place on October 31, 1517.

So, here we have it, an October convergence of the experiences of Martin Luther, Moses, and this Presbyterian preacher. And I hope that you won’t think this too presumptuous, but the image that plants itself in my mind is of myself being flanked on one side by Moses and on the other side by Martin Luther. Since I have anticipated the emotion of this day for me, it has been steady to imagine a companion like Martin Luther on my right side and a companion like Moses on my left side as I have approached today.

I will confess that approaching this 500th anniversary of the events in Wittenberg made me realize that I really did not know very much about this slice of history and Martin Luther himself beyond the basics, the basics being that a practice in the Catholic church which enabled friends and relatives of a person who had died to purchase “indulgences” in order to “purge” deceased souls so that they could experience the fullness of divine reward had become corrupt. Luther’s 95 Theses decried this practice, and while Luther never expected this, it turned out to be, in the estimation of many, the tipping point which launched the Protestant Reformation. (This is certainly an oversimplification of history!) Yet, despite their historical significance (and this is a little embarrassing, but perhaps not so surprising for a lifelong Calvinist), I had never read a single one of Luther’s 95 Theses.

So this week I read them.

And the first reads this way: When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.

In our time, cartoonists have regularly had fun inventing long-haired, bearded, barefoot nuns carrying signs with a huge single sign “Repent” (1)...”or at least apologize” as one cartoon that I came across expressed in asterisked small print.

Repentance had become a corrupt practice of the church in Luther’s day. In our day, repentance doesn’t get very good press either. A prayer of confession at church once a week is okay, but don’t take repentance too far or people will think that you’re a crazy religious fanatic.

But what Luther was all about was calling the church back to the notion that repentance is not what you do to earn a divine reward. Repentance is a response to the promises and the grace of God. In the first thesis, he invited people to think of repentance as a change of heart that encompasses the whole of a person’s life. And repentance that involves a change of heart that encompasses the whole of a person’s life opens us up. It frees us not only of our own personal failings and sins, but even what our ancestors did when they used power to build empires that led to the killing of millions of God’s children in wars, the enslavement of our fellow human beings, the exploitation of the weak. (2) It frees us to listen to the promptings of God’s Wind/Breath/Spirit so that we can follow through with new resolves and new patterns (3) as participants in shaping the future that God intends for the cosmos.

This notion of repentance was revealed in Moses’s life, if one stops to think about it. Remember that Moses was a murderer, a fugitive, when out in the wilderness God knocked Moses’s sandals off his feet and told him he was standing on holy ground and was being called to lead people from slavery into freedom. He did not get to enter the promised land and the reasons for that are a bit ambiguous. Old Testament scholar Pat Miller suggests that it was not his own disobedience in striking the rock twice at Meribah but because he shares the existence of the Israelites and so must suffer with them. (4)

At the end, the God who knows Moses face to face takes him up the mountain for a panoramic view, a panoramic view of the promised land where God will take the people alongside their new leader.

One could not preach a sermon commemorating Martin Luther and based on Deuteronomy 34 without mentioning the last sermon which was preached by Martin Luther’s namesake, Martin Luther King Jr. The sermon that Martin Luther King preached on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated in Memphis, was based on Deuteronomy 34: “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to now tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.” (5)

What God gave Moses, what God gave Martin Luther King, what we trust that God gave Martin Luther, and what God gives us as a precious gift in those moments when, as the biblical writer said, “our sight is unimpaired” is a panoramic view. It is a panoramic view beyond our shortcomings, our failings, our disobedience, our sin. It is a panoramic view which transcends even our greatest accomplishments.

It is a panoramic view of what the world will look like one day, one day!!!, if God's people take repentance, a change of heart, as our entire way of life.

I will close by saying that I have come to this last Sunday before my retirement with a tear in the corner of one eye and a tear in the corner of the other eye. One tear that bespeaks some sadness that I won't be continuing on the journey with you from this point on; the other tear is a tear of gratitude to God for blessing me through the people of four magnificently faithful congregations-fellow disciples of Lakewood Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida, Richmond Heights Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, University Presbyterian in San Antonio, and you at Davidson College Presbyterian Church-fellow disciples in all four churches who have cut me way more slack than I deserve, fellow disciples who have forgiven me more times than I dare to count, fellow disciples who have shown me with their lives what it is to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, as today's New Testament lesson says, fellow disciples who have taught me what it looks like to live the whole of one's life as repentance.

One last thing, DCPC, I'm going to be watching you. Yes, I'm going to be watching...not from the mountaintop, but from the Lowcountry, with love for you that springs from the bottom of my heart and with joyful anticipation of where you will go alongside the Joshuas who are already here, that is, your present-day leaders Robert, Claire, John, Jane, David, Larry, Jenny, Matt, Stephanie, Harriett, Kristin, Hunter, and their fellow workers Trish, Sid, Rhonda, Julie, Peggy, Eric, and our preschool teachers who together are, bar none, the most amazing staff in the whole wide world, the new Joshua who goes by the name of Scott who will be here mid-week to begin serving as your interim pastor, and a few months down the road from now, yet another Joshua, your next pastor.

Thank you, DCPC. I love you!

1. Martin E. Marty, *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day That Changed the World* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2016), 14.
2. *Ibid.*, 10.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.
4. Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 43.
5. James M. Washington, editor, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 286.