

“What Does It Take?”

- I. Introduction: What Does It Take? What does it take for a community of faith to qualify for God’s blessings rather than God’s curses? That question may sound odd to many of us – particularly when we are accustomed to seeing evidence of God’s blessings all around us. We sing of God’s blessings, we come to church to thank God for our blessings, and indeed, all the evidence at hand would support the notion that God has and continues to bless us richly at The Church of the Ascension.

Yet, here we are this morning with this reading from Deuteronomy: “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today.” The theme of choosing between seeking God’s blessing or risking God’s curse is found throughout Scripture. God is always giving God’s people choices and always helping clarify the implications of those choices once made. In fact, this is the way I understand the blessing/curse scenario. God wants us to comprehend for our own wellbeing that there are consequences associated with the choices we make. These consequences are not random. They are clearly a part of how God has created us and the natural order. We will prosper and live life most fully when we open ourselves up to what God has to teach us and we will have tougher times when we turn away from God.

- II. The message of Moses. One of my most exciting discoveries in seminary was the Hebrew Scriptures or what many of us call the Old Testament. It contains the story of God’s people through one adventure after another. The beautiful book of Deuteronomy consists of four sermons Moses delivered to the Hebrews. Our reading today is from the second and longest of Moses’ sermons. What Moses wanted his people to really understand in this passage is as valid for us here this morning at the Church of the Ascension as it was for the wandering Hebrews who were about to enter into the promised land. There are two clear messages I’d hope to lift up from this passage: first, it is not enough just to take the words of God into our minds. Look at what the opening sentence in our Deuteronomy reading: “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. “ It is not enough to listen. We are directed to take the words into our hearts and souls and into our minds, to take the words in and make them a part of who we are. And then we are to let the words guide what we do with these hands of ours. Our commitment is to be deep, intentional, and all encompassing.

That is a lot, but we are not to stop here. We are to teach these words to our children, talking about God's words not only in church, but also when we are at home, when we lie down to rest, and when we rise up to begin our days. I grew up in an area with a large Jewish population. On Jewish high holidays, it was not unusual for 30 of the 34 students in my class to be absent. One of the things I observed in the lives of my Jewish friends was how committed their families were to making sure that they learned about their faith. For several years, my Jewish friends went to Hebrew School every day to learn the Hebrew language, to be able to translate the Torah, and to prepare for their bar or bas mitzvahs – the liturgy of coming to age in the Jewish community. Their faith commitment was deep and intentional. There is much we can learn from their example.

- III. Moses at Ascension. If Moses were here preaching at Ascension this morning instead of me, I believe that he might say to us: “Brothers and Sisters (I'm not sure he'd really begin this way!), I urge you – go deep, be intentional, and all encompassing in the way you study and take in God's words. And never tire of teaching God's words to your children, your youth, and one another. Demonstrate in your own lives how you are taking in God's words and living out those words in this community.”

We could reassure Moses that we are being intentional in teaching God's words to our children and youth and to each other. In just a few moments you will receive an update on our Vacation Bible School. We are excited about what is happening this year and ask for your continued support. We need additional resources to offer this program and are looking to deeply engage our children in learning about God and God's words. In addition, earlier this week, a group of 15 pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago and their family members met with someone who spent 77 days a year ago walking the entire pilgrim route from France into Spain. He shared that the experience of making this pilgrimage led to a deep spiritual experience with God. We hope the same will be true for our pilgrims who leave for our journey in late June.

Yesterday I was honored to attend the ordination of Brett Backus to the transitional diaconate. He will join our staff on August 1. A priority in his ministry will be to work with our youth. In this service we will celebrate the completion of the EFM Program by several of our parishioners. This effort has required phenomenal commitment to study of the scriptures. After church today the new Adult Education Commission will meet to continue planning adult educational programs for next year. They will also move forward with a special educational series made possible by an anonymous donor. Two weeks ago, those of you who attended the Ministry Fair saw exhibits from over 40 parish ministries. I hope you are continuing to reflect and pray about whether you are being called to participate in one or more of these ministries.

IV. Conclusion. We have made considerable progress in many program areas here at Church of the Ascension. But in the end, everything else aside, the words of Moses ring in my ears. What will happen in the life of this community of faith is totally dependent upon our clarity about how much we need God, our willingness to commit to learning God's word, and our intentionality in transmitting our faith to the generation that follows us. If we are clear about these priorities we can count on receiving God's continued blessing. The choice is ours.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, draw us into a future that is based upon our commitment to you. Help us to be clear about our intentions and act upon our faith. In Jesus name,
Amen.