

Past, Present, Future
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
August 29, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

There is a small convenience store just a half mile down the road from our house. I stop in several times a week. I've never noticed their music until this week. I really couldn't tell you if they just started having music this week, or it's just never caught my ear before. But this week, they've been playing old country music. Old to me, country music that must have seeped into my long term memory as a child. The first song that I notice was "Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver. The next time I went in, it was "The Gambler," by Kenny Rogers. Next time, "Rocking Years" sung by Dolly Parton and George Jones. Since I was wearing my mask, I felt free to sing along quietly, and it turns out, I know just about all the words to each of those.

My brother tells me that I have a much clearer memory of our shared past than he does. He chalks it up to me being more "sentimental." Some of it is surely because I'm two years older. But some of us—this group includes me—are just more apt to remember the past, to treasure it, and turn toward it. I don't think it's a coincidence that I love to read historical fiction and can't stand science fiction, which is frequently looking toward the future. Some of us are oriented toward the past, some toward the present, and some to the future. I'd be interested to hear which you think you might be. I'm not going to be good at describing present and future oriented people, because I'm pretty sure I'm past oriented.

This passage from Deuteronomy looks to the past. This is the introduction to Moses's recitation of the law. So he reminds them of their past with God, and God's past with them. Moses reminds them that their God is near to them, and that God is the one giving them this law. In verse 9, which is key to the passage, he encourages them not to forget everything they've seen—and he doesn't mean things that only they themselves have seen, but the things their parents and grandparents have seen and told them, since God delivered them from enslavement in Egypt.

The past that they share, their past encounters and journeys with God, have formed them into the people they are today. Their past has shaped their identity as God's people. They are the people who God delivered out of bondage, out of Egypt, who God led through the wilderness, and who God has promised

this land they are about to enter.

Our past as a church has formed our identity, too. You all love to tell me, and remind each other, of people who were important members of this congregation, the pastors who loved you, the good times and lean times. Our pasts as individuals shape us, just as our past as a congregation shapes us. We wouldn't be who we are today, were it not for those who came before us.

At this point in their journey, the present for the story's purposes, they have completed their wandering in the wilderness and are looking forward to the future in the Promised Land. But they are paused here, just before their hopes become realized, before the future can happen, to reflect on their past, yes, but also to receive the law. Now this is where combining the books of the Bible gets confusing, because they've already received much of the law in the books of Exodus and Numbers, and here Moses is presented as giving it to them again.

He has reminded them of their past, and how their past has created their identity. Now, in the present, this law that they are receiving is meant, among other things, to help them hang on to this identity. This law, for instance the laws to keep kosher food practices, will make them different than their neighbors. It will make them stand out, maybe be ridiculed or questioned. But it—not just the kosher laws, but all the laws—will bind them together and make them into a people. They aren't to add to the law, nor take away from it. As they receive the whole law, which is rooted in their past and will affect their future identity, they are being bound together by God, through the law.

Our present, as a congregation, is something I think we are still figuring out. What does it mean that we are meeting both in person and on zoom? How is that shaping our identity, making us who we are right now? What does it mean that we were not together in this sanctuary for so long—over a year? How does that change who we are? How can we reach out to our community and be safe as we do so? I'm not sure we have that completely figured out either. I can tell you we aren't alone in wondering who we are in the present moment. Lots of churches are undergoing similar changes and discussions.

In the last words of our passage this morning, Moses looks toward the future. He tells them to remember the things they have seen, to keep them in their minds all the days of their life, and then to teach them to their children and their children's children. Just a couple chapters later, he repeats the instruction to teach the law to the next generations. Moses is looking toward the future, and calling the people to look toward the future, too.

Like I said, looking toward the future doesn't come naturally to me. I think

it's particularly hard for all of us right now. What will the world look like in six months? A year? I can't even fathom making a five year plan. I mean, last Sunday we were praying for Connecticut and a hurricane, and today it's Louisiana and a different hurricane which wasn't even on our literal radar last week. We've learned to hold our future plans lightly and loosely, so that our disappointments will be something we can bear. And that's a hard place to stand, to look toward the future, limiting our dreams so that we won't be too sad when they can't come true.

The Israelites would encounter all sorts of trouble in their future. Trouble settling in the land. Trouble with judges. Trouble with kings. More trouble with kings. Trouble that the prophets told them about. Trouble with bigger kingdoms, and finally trouble with exile. They didn't know any of that as they listened to the law. They couldn't have. They couldn't see the future any better than we can.

Moses told them to do what they could do, though. He told them to hold on tight to who they were, to who God had made them to be. They were not to forget their past, because it was important to who they were. It had made them who they were. And they weren't to neglect the law in their present, because God continued to make them into a holy people who worshiped a holy God. And they were to tell those stories, over and over, they were to recite and practice the law, over and over, so that their future would be the future of God's people, because that is who God was making them to be, a continual process that stretched into the future, farther than any human can see.

We trust that same God, the God whose past deeds we remember, the God who is with us and for us in this present moment, and the God who will be in our future, no matter what our future looks like or holds.