

Love and the Promised Land  
22 Pentecost; October 25, 2026  
Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Deut 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matt 22:34-46

Our Gospel reading for this morning may be Jesus' single most important teaching. What is the greatest commandment? Love. Love of God and love of neighbor.

But before I say more about Christian love, we need to look at our first reading. It is one of the most poignant scenes in the entire Bible.

Long before Moses, God promised Abraham to give the land we now know as Israel to Abraham's descendants. But during Moses' lifetime, those descendants—the Hebrew people—were not in the Promised Land. They were enslaved in Egypt.

Moses himself grew up in Egypt, but he fled as a young man, became a shepherd, married, and had a couple of children.

That was Moses' life until God appeared to him in a burning bush on Mount Sinai. God commanded Moses to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, who was perhaps the most powerful human being on earth, and then lead the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land.

Moses was understandably hesitant, but he did what God commanded. Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, back to Mount Sinai where he received the Law, and then through the wilderness for forty years, to the very edge of the Promised Land.

And that is where Moses and his people were as the book of Deuteronomy begins. Virtually the whole book is a series of speeches delivered by Moses immediately before the Hebrews reach the goal they have been pursuing for forty years.

Then, as we just heard, Moses climbed Mount Nebo. God showed Moses the Promised Land. And Moses died, outside the Promised Land, just shy of his goal.

I don't know how you hear that story. For me, it is a little painful. I am VERY goal-oriented, more goal-oriented than is good for me.

Here's an example. Over a nine-year period, I hiked the Appalachian Trail, which is 2000 miles long. My eldest son joined me for the last section. Carrie and Nicholas joined us for the very last day, the hike up Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Mount Katahdin is tough. I had not known how tough Mount Katahdin was when I planned the trip and invited Carrie and Nicholas to join us. The night before we attempted our ascent, I fretted. What should I do if we got halfway up Katahdin, and they couldn't make it? My goal would be in sight. I had been working towards it for nine years. I had walked two-thousand miles. But could I just abandon my wife and son in their hour of need?

Sadly, the answer was, yes. I would absolutely have abandoned them, and without hesitation. That's how perversely goal-oriented I can be. Thankfully, they did make it, so I was not exposed as a total jerk that day.

There was an amusing sequel. The next morning, Carrie complained that her whole body hurt. Just then Nicholas came into the room, and she asked him if he was in pain. Fourteen-year-old Nicholas said, no, and, with genuine puzzlement, "why would I be?" It's good to be young!

So, when I hear that Moses was in sight of the goal he had been working towards for forty years but couldn't actually cross the finish line, it makes my head explode.

But, of course, life is like that. We have hopes and goals and, at least some of the time, we can't reach them. There is the Promised Land, but just beyond our grasp.

Other times we do reach our goals, and they turn out to be disappointing, not the Promised Land after all.

That was my experience at the end of the Appalachian Trail. When we reached the top of Mount Katahdin, the summit was crowded with other hikers, and it was cold and windy. We had brought a picnic, but we ate as quickly as we could while huddling in a wind break, and then we hurried back down. It was VERY anticlimactic.

As it turned out, that was the experience of the Hebrew people, too. After Moses died, they made it into the Promised Land. They experienced many blessings there. But they experienced all kinds of problems, too.

Saint Augustine tells us why that is how it will always be. Augustine says in a prayer to God, “our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Our worldly goals, however worthy they might be, will never perfectly satisfy us because what we really long for is not a place to be, or the completion of a hike, or anything else like that. Beneath all of our many surface desires, is a longing for God that nothing else can satisfy.

I think again about Moses on Mount Nebo.

I’m pretty sure Moses reacted better than I would have done. I presume Moses enjoyed his glimpse of the Promised Land. But Moses was wise enough to understand that life was going to be just as messy and complicated in the Promised Land as it had been in the wilderness.

But what really mattered in that moment was not anything happening out there. What really mattered was God’s presence with Moses.

As Moses looked out at the Promised Land off in the distance, Moses also experienced the promise of God’s presence with him right where he was. And God’s presence made Mount Nebo the Promised Land for Moses.

We, too, can look ahead to the fulfillment of God’s promises in eternal life, the Promised Land off in the distance for us. And we, too, can experience God’s promise and God’s presence with us right now as if, just for a moment, we are in the Promised Land.

In a few minutes, some of us will share glimpses of the Promised Land in our God moments.

Our God moments will probably not look much like Moses’ God moment on Mount Nebo. My own God moments are mostly not very dramatic. One happened while I was writing this sermon. I paused to look out my window and there was at a maple tree chock-full of bright red leaves.

But in at least one important way, every God moment is the same. Every God moment is characterized by love because God is love, meaning every experience of God is also an experience of love.

And, at last, we are ready to go deeper into the great commandment to love God and neighbor. When the lawyer asks his question about which commandment in the law is the greatest, he was testing Jesus. Jesus answered the question, and passed the test.

But if the lawyer had been more sincere, if he had really wanted to learn, Jesus could have said more to him. Jesus could have said that the very word “commandment” can be misleading.

God’s command to love isn’t, or shouldn’t be, something we hear as a difficult and painful obligation.

God’s love command reminds us that we are God’s beloved children created in God’s own image and likeness. And God is love. When we love, we are doing what God created us to do.

And, when we love, we are experiencing the God who is love. Every act of love is a God moment. Every act of love is a glimpse of the Promised Land. Every act of love is a taste of eternal life.

Love is the only goal that matters. And we can reach that goal anytime.

My prayer for us is that we, like Moses, will live lives of true intimacy with God so that, when we come to our ends, we can know that God is with us, and that the Promised Land is in reach.

In Christ’s name. Amen.