

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2020; Proper 25A

The Episcopal Church of the Atonement

The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

I love the fall. The sky is often clear and beautiful. The trees put on a magic color show. The air gradually loses its mildewy dampness and picks up a brisk feel that makes all of the knitting that I do seem practical. But it is not just natural beauty that makes me love the fall—this is the season of planning.

I can plan how to use up the last of the herbs in the garden, and that leads me to think about Thanksgiving, so I can plan that menu. And then of course, the guests—who is coming and how shall I set the table? And then following on Thanksgiving comes Advent, a favorite time of the church year, with its counting of weeks and days. And then Christmas at home and Christmas in church!

And, then, too, this is budget season in the church, so there is planning for our Stewardship campaign, and planning for next year's programming. And there is Diocesan Convention, and the opportunity to see colleagues from all over the Diocese. The Farmers' Market is over for the year, but the closing of the books means that the planning for next year begins!

It is of course a lot of hard work, but it is filled with people to love and good things to do—or perhaps I should say, things to do for good—I love a good season of planning.

And so, I wonder this morning, is there any story in the Bible more poignant than our reading from the Hebrew scriptures: *The LORD said to [Moses], "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.*

Moses had not only planned every bit of the Hebrews' escape from bondage, he had become the partner with the Lord. He had seen God face to face—more than once! And he had taken what the Lord showed him, and taught him, and gave him, and made good plans for God's people. And he and the Lord had delivered the people. The Promised Land was right there for him to see.

And he dies before he gets there. In fact, the text tells us: he died there *at the Lord's command*. And it won't be the last time in the Biblical story that we ask, "What on earth was God thinking?" What good news are we supposed to glean from the sadness of Moses not getting to set foot on that holy soil, from the sadness of God making sure that Moses would not get there?

What was the point of all the planning? What was the point of painting the doorways with blood so that the Lord would pass over? What was the point of eating their food standing up? What was the point of gathering the daily manna as they wandered in the wilderness? Wasn't it so that they would all get the big pay-off—the beautiful plot of land where the

rivers flowed with milk and honey—a place where Moses could retire and watch his grandchildren establish the family dynasty? A place where Moses could, at last, stop planning and start enjoying?

Our Gospel lesson today has a similar theme. Jesus has taught just about all there is to teach. And still the authorities come after him, trying to trap him. The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees—anyone else want to have a go? So the Pharisees try one last time—they set Jesus a legal test—which law is the greatest?

Jesus speaks the words that God gave to Moses shortly before the scene we have in today's first reading. When asked a trick question, Jesus repeated what were likely the first verses of the Bible that his mother taught him, words that the faithful had been repeating daily for thousands of years before Jesus and continue to repeat to this day: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

And then Jesus adds, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. There are 613 commandments of the Law in the Hebrew Scriptures—those commandments that Moses received from God and delivered to the people, and Jesus repeats the first and sums up the other 612 this way: *love your neighbor as yourself*. These two commandments of God are the whole point of everything in the Biblical witness.

And with that teaching, Jesus has taught what he came to teach. So he asks a concluding question of the Pharisees, *Who is the Messiah?* That is, who has God sent to save you? And the Pharisees know that answer. The answer is standing right in front of them, but they cannot force themselves to admit it. The Pharisees do not have the courage of Moses, who saw God face to face. The Pharisees are standing right in front of God, engaging in conversation with Jesus, and they will not admit it. And so, they do not dare speak to him again.

Moses and Jesus have unique experiences of God, but their stories offer good news for us. Because they teach us that we may see God face to face—we may experience God ourselves—we may even speak directly with God, and live.

We will live—we will live the rich, abundant lives that God offers each one of us. We will live, but what we may have trouble doing is *planning*, because after all our time is in God's hands. I know why I love to plan so much—and those of you who know me have probably already figured it the problem I am presenting. I love to plan, because in those moments of scheming and dreaming and drawing up maps and schedules, I think that I am in charge. Planning gives me the illusion that I am in control.

Well, there is just one word for me—and anyone else like me who thinks that she is in control. And that word is: PANDEMIC. So much for a happy season of fall planning. This fall the planning has seemed more like scrambling to make something happen to take the place of the thing that cannot happen, even though we thought it could, but now we realize

that it can't. So, what to do, when there is no planning to love? What to do at these times when it becomes crystal clear that you are not in charge, have never been in charge, and never will be in charge?

Jesus told us what to do: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

Listen, I know that the pandemic is a serious situation. And I do not for one minute minimize the hard and important work of research scientists and doctors and nurses and health care workers of all kinds. But as serious as the pandemic is, for me it comes down to: how can I respond to the pandemic by loving God and loving God's people?

And really, that is—or it should be the question that we ask during any season of planning. We are writing the church budget: how do we use our money to love God and love God's people? We are planning a series on Becoming Beloved Community: how do we include parts about loving God and loving God's people? We are planning a Farmers' Market: how does our work come from our love of God? And how does the Market show our love of God's people?

Perhaps you, too, enjoy making plans for seasons and holidays and your future. And the plan-making in and of itself is not the problem. It's that phony sense of control that makes the trouble. The pandemic has presented us with sickness and sorrow, for sure. And it has created serious and important work for those on the front lines of fighting the virus, and strategizing how to minimize its effects.

But the pandemic also presents us with an opportunity. We can make our plans to love God and love God's people in new and different ways. How to show God's love wearing a mask and keeping social distance? With each Zoom party and Live streamed worship service, with each virtual Diocesan Convention or amusing face mask, we are planning our love. And planning our love is so much more life giving than loving our plan!

All the people who know best are telling us that we will be living with the pandemic for years. And that is a daunting thought. Some of us may not live long enough to look back on this time. So, let's not look back. Let's look out and ahead. We have the example of Moses, who stood on top of the mountain, and was able to see the preferred future for God's people. And we have the example of Jesus, who from the vantage point of the Cross, looked out on the people of God with eyes of love.