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READ THROUGH THE ENTIRE WORD

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Our Old Testament lesson this morning comes in the Book of Deuteronomy, the sixth chapter beginning with the 20th verse. Now, Deuteronomy is, in essence, a long sermon. We see Moses during those final days of his life when God calls him to continue to prepare the people to enter into the Promised Land. Moses is not allowed to enter in.

As I was reading through Deuteronomy this last week, I found it troubling how many times God reminds him that he won't enter in. Then God tells him to go up to this mountain, Mt. Pisgah, where he is to die. As he does, he looks out over all that God had promised.

Moses: who had been faithful to those for whom he had taken great responsibility in fleeing from Egypt. Moses: who had led our people through the wilderness 18 months to reach the Promised Land where they went in and came back with a majority report and so didn't take it. Moses: who spent another 38 ½ years helping our people

understand what it all was and that God's promises could be true for us. Moses now gathers the people and begins to give them his final sermon, which is God's word to them through Moses.

If you read Deuteronomy, you will notice that much of it is familiar: teachings, laws, remembrances of what God had done for them. It is Moses' way of encapsulating all of that into a second telling of the law and then to say to those who read it and hear it that it should be read over and over and over. It should be taken into our families and into our worship: it should be taken into our very existence. We will talk about why that is in just a moment. But let me read for you these verses beginning with verse 20 in chapter six.

Deuteronomy 6:20-25

When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'

Now in the New Testament, the 24th chapter in the Gospel of Luke beginning with the 13th verse: This is a story after Jesus' resurrection, the story of two of the followers of Jesus who on that day of resurrection, that first day of the week, have heard a story but have not felt compelled to stay in Jerusalem. At the end of that day they have begun a journey to Emmaus, which is a town about seven miles away. Listen again to the word of our Lord:

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing,

Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened

on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Now, I'm going to ask you to do something very, very simple. I'd like you to touch your face. That's the number one way to catch the flu. I was watching a news clip about a cruise ship and a virus that had come and come back on the cruise ship. They said something interesting. They said that, on average, we touch our faces 16 times an hour. Sixteen times an hour!

Now none of you are going to pay any attention to the rest of the things I have to say. You are just going to wonder whether or not you are going to touch your face again. You will notice you are starting to do it and you will put your hand away or you will find a way to do your sleeve or whatever. But I promise you, you will lose your track and catch your self—or actually not catch yourself more often than not.

Now what does that have to do with anything? It has to do with everything in the Book of Deuteronomy. God knows that we are going to touch our face. God knows that we are going to make ourselves vulnerable to spiritual infection. That's what Deuteronomy is all about. It's about an opportunity for us to at least consider how we might make ourselves less vulnerable to that spiritual infection.

In Deuteronomy, God gives us something to do with our hands. That's really what the whole teaching in Deuteronomy is about: the statutes, the laws, the ordinances, the remembrances of what God has done for us, how he has set us free, and the remembrances of how many times we have failed God. I mean, how many times have we fallen back? God knows. So God gives us some things to do so that we might stay as spiritual healthy as we can. God knows as well as you and I know that Egypt is a very tempting place to which to return. I think that is what the apostle Paul knew when he said, "The good that I want to do I can't, and that what I don't want to do I seem to continue to do." It's so so very tempting to go back to Egypt.

I was talking to someone just a week or so ago who was celebrating with me that he had just received his 40-year chip in AA. Forty years of sobriety! I said to him, "Well you know, it must be an amazing

thing to have that victory in your life, to feel as if you have conquered that.”

He looked at me and said, “No, no, no, no, no! Every day I wake up and, the first thing every day, I crave a drink. I have learned that without some accountability, without something to do, without something with which to replace it, I know even after 40 years of sobriety that I will go back.” Some of us may and some of us may not understand what that form of addiction may be like, but let me say this to you: every single one of you knows what I’m saying.

When my kids were little, I made a promise every day that I wasn’t going to raise my voice. Then they woke up. I have made promises to myself, and I have prayed, and I have sought to be able to hold my tongue when I knew I shouldn’t say something. There are places in my life where I wanted to be able to honor someone,... You see what I’m saying?

Every single one of us knows what it’s like to say, “I don’t want to do that anymore, I don’t want to be that person anymore, I don’t want to act like that anymore, or I don’t want to feel like that anymore, I don’t want to be that person anymore.” And we try, but how tempting it is to go back to those things. In all honesty, I find myself going back to them when I’m the most tired, the most fatigued, when I’m the most worn out.

Kristine Rand said this to me one time on a mission trip years ago. She said, “You know, the thing about mission trips is you really have a great time. You hang out with people and you get to love each other and all. But you also get to see who people really are because, when you are so tired and you haven’t slept, the real you really comes out.”

You see, it’s easy; it’s easy to go back to Egypt because it has such a strong powerful, powerful pull. And so God wants to give us some help. Basically in the Bible in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is a war, a battle, a struggle between two kingdoms. Now there is a cosmic struggle between Satan and Christ, between Satan and God; but on the earthly temple level, the struggle is played out in a somewhat different way.

The struggle in Deuteronomy is basically the struggle between the kingdom that God wants to establish with the people and the danger of assimilation. Here is what I mean by that. In Deuteronomy, you see, Moses already knows that the people are going to enter into the Promised Land. He is reminding them of what has happened to their ancestors and in that journey and through all the wilderness.

But as you read Deuteronomy, you see very, very clearly that everything is in preparation for what they are going to receive. Throughout Deuteronomy, God says, "Don't you do it, don't you accept the way those people worship. Tear those poles down. Don't you dare think that after you tear that place down where they have worshiped that you can worship on that spot. You've got to go someplace else. Be really careful because, if you start intermarrying with them and then a little bit creeps in and then a little bit more creeps in, before you know it you will have compromised everything about me. I am your God. I am the *only* God and I am the only God that is worthy of worship."

The real danger for your life is not that one day you will wake up and say, "I have decided to abandon this God and follow this one," but it will, slowly but surely, creep into your life.

In the New Testament it's really the same thing. But in the New Testament, it's really the competition, the struggle, between deciding for the Kingdom of God as we understand it through Jesus Christ and the kingdom of the Roman empire, the way the world lives and the way we understand it in the midst of whether it be oppression or whether it be the rules or the standards or those kinds of things. And so we have a choice again in the New Testament. Which kingdom are we going to choose to serve?

And so you have these disciples, these followers of Christ, who are walking back to Emmaus on the day on which Jesus has been raised. You have to believe in some way that they didn't quite get it or that they didn't quite believe it. I mean, they have heard about these stories of Jesus, but if they really thought it was true, wouldn't they stay another night or another day? But no, they go back and, of course, there could be other reasons. Maybe they had a job they needed to report to or maybe something else. But they start to go back.

As they are walking along, Jesus comes alongside them on the road. Their eyes are covered spiritually, so they don't recognize him. They start talking and say, "Didn't you hear about this? Were you the only one there who didn't hear the story? Didn't you hear the people talking about him being raised?"

And Jesus said, "Well, doesn't that make sense to you? Isn't that what everything in your Word has said?" And then the Bible says, *"Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."*

Jesus is saying to them and to us, in essence, "If you open this Bible and you read it, you will be reminded over and over and over of who I am; but without that, you will so easily forget even if it has just been a few days that you have been distant from me."

You see, it is so tempting to touch our face 16 times an hour—to be vulnerable to spiritual infection. I think that happens in our world today. I was reading in another book a similar story, and it reminded me of one of my dad's favorite stories.

My dad was a great Southern storyteller. The stories that my dad could tell! One of his favorite stories he would tell me at particular times in my life was the story of when, as a little boy, he and my Uncle Charlie were supposed to be working in the fields.

They grew up in the deep, deep South in abject poverty. They were supposed to be working in the fields when one day their mom and dad went off. When they went off, they thought, "Well, we can work in the fields or we can play." They, at this young age, decided that they were going to play. So, they went and got a chicken and they put kind of like a chalk line in the sand or in the dirt. They took that chicken and they held that chicken's head down with the beak right up over that chalk line. They just held it there and held it there and held it there. After awhile, that chicken became so focused on the chalk line that, after they let go of it, the chicken was still frozen—mesmerized by that chalk line.

Then, as the story goes, they went and got another chicken and put that chicken right behind the first one and just held its head down long enough to become mesmerized by that chalk line. Then they went and got another, and another, and another. The story from my

dad was that, ultimately, they had about 30 chickens all in one line just mesmerized, just frozen. And then his mom and dad came home at an inopportune time—earlier than they had thought they would. And, boy! Were they in trouble! Then the story went on about the punishment they got.

My dad told me that story over and over and over at particular points in my life. --In the third grade when I wondered if Julie Ann Farrell was going to take my Valentine card or not. --In the 5th grade when I was trying out for a particular little league team and wasn't sure if I was going to make it. --And later, when I was so worried about what grade I was going to make because I had to succeed, I had to be a success, I had to do all of that.

My dad would sit down and he would start telling that story. He would elaborate it; he would go into the details. Sometimes he would go 20 or 30 minutes, and I would be sitting there thinking, "This is the longest, blasted story ever! I know how it ends, Dad; you don't have to keep telling me." But, you see, what my dad was saying to me in his own way was, "Jimmy, you are becoming mesmerized. You have got you head down so much that you are missing what really matters."

Now, be honest with yourself. How many times are you mesmerized--frozen by the chalk line that is in front of you? Those of you who are parents with small kids who think parenting is such an important thing: let me tell you, parenting has nothing to do with the value of being able to recognize your children.

Now here is what I mean by that. Sometimes we become so focused on that chalk line-- "This is what I've got to do as a parent, this is what they've got to do, this is where they've got to go, this is how they've got to do, this is the team they've got to get on, this is the activity they've got to be involved, they've got to do this, they've got to do this, they've got to do this,..."-- that we become so mesmerized with that line that I never stop to even appreciate and even love our kids. Yes, we love them; but do you stop and marvel at their beauty? Do you stop and marvel and say, "Lord, this could only be of you?"

Or, for those of you who are in school right now: "Oh Lord, that chalk line. Oh Lord, I got to get in, I got to get in, I got to get in. I got in, now I got to do, I got to do, I got to do, and I got to get out, I got to

get out, I got to get out,..."-- and it just becomes this over and over and over and that chalk line and you just become mesmerized by it. Or, how we are succeeding in our business life, or how we are doing in our relationships, and all of those kinds of things. It is so easy to keep our heads down.

Let me tell you where the danger is: the greatest danger is being unaware of danger. The greatest danger in the spiritual life is being unaware of danger. It's to think: "I'm doing all the right stuff, I'm on the right path, I'm on the right trail, I'm just doing it, I've got my head down, I'm keeping it going, I'm keeping it going,..." And while I think it's going well, who knows what's around me? I don't know because I can't lift up my head. Who knows what's coming over me or what's threatening or what's a danger for my family or. ...

Vic Pentz puts it this way. He says that every time he takes Caroline, his big chocolate lab, in the car and he gets going down the road at a pretty good speed, he rolls the window down and Caroline sticks her head out and.... Man! That wind blowing back and half the slobber is going out and half is coming in and it's all kind of whipping around in the car and everything and she just--and you know how she's got her head out there, and she is just eating it up!

He says he always imagines that Caroline is thinking, "I am the fastest dog in the world! I'm going 55 miles an hour! I am an amazing dog! I am Super Dog!" He says that all the while that Caroline seems so excited about it, the reality of it is she is expending zero percent of her energy and she is only along for the ride.

Dick says he wonders how many of us as Christians are the same way. We start to say, "Yeah, I'm in love with Jesus. I'm in love with the Lord. Everything is going well, I'm happy, I'm on track, everything just seems to be going well,..."—and we roll along, and we roll along, and we roll along. But ultimately, when we really look at it, the truth is that we are expending so little energy that we really are just along for the ride.

So what God does is he gives us opportunities. "I'll let you test whether you are along for the ride or not. I'll let this activity of prayer come into your life and let you get down into that kind of prayer that is just groaning, the prayers that are too deep for words. Or, I'll give you the opportunity to give in your financial life in certain ways that will cause a sacrifice for you that will cause you to adjust your life to

your life. Or, I will place within you this challenge to be able to be in relationship with someone with whom it is sometimes a struggle. You see, I'm not going to allow you to expend zero percent of your energy to think everything is going well and for you to just be along for the ride because there is going to be a time when you've got to get out of that and you've got to know for yourself."

So, here in Deuteronomy, chapter six, verse 23, is the bottom line: God said, "I brought you out to bring you in." This is what Moses says, "Teach your children, remind them of what happened in Egypt, remind them of what God has done. I brought you out to bring you in."

The bottom line is throughout Scripture. From the beginning to the very end, our God is a God of deliverance, our God is a God who delivers us. Our God is a delivering God who sets us free from the bondage of Pharaoh--who sets us free from that kingdom of the world--and he sets us free to live for the kingdom of Christ. He sets us free from the bondage of our sins to be living free in the kingdom of grace. This is who our God is. This is what our God has to offer us. And, this is what we find, not only in Deuteronomy, but we find it throughout all of Scripture.

We give a book away every week to those who visit for the first time. You can buy this book up in The Loft. It's by Donald Miller and is called, *Searching for God Knows What*. This follows another book of his, *Blue Like Jazz*. There is a story in here I have shared with some of you before that has changed the way I look at the first chapters of Genesis.

Miller says that if you really look at the book of Genesis and you look at the story of Adam and Eve, it's a story that we have just trivialized. We talk about the Garden of Eden and we automatically assume that it's kind of this British garden with the boxwood growing and everything is just perfect and manicured and all like that. Except, if you really think about it, the Bible says that in the middle of this garden is a river. And that river was so great that it actually was the source of four amazingly massive rivers themselves and four incredible territories were carved out by those rivers.

So, if we read this and we see that this one river ran through the garden, it had to be one huge river that was cutting this swath, just

wearing out and building. Then you start to look at how big that land was. And that, as Adam is created, he is created out of the mud or the clay or the slime of that river. And God created him and God said, "Okay, now you are going to have dominion, and I'm going to send you out in this garden and you are going to have the garden." And, we think, "Oh, he's just going to sit in this nice British garden and have tea in little porcelain cups and all." But, the truth is he is probably walking his entire life never going back to the same spot again. The area maybe larger than, say, the state of Montana or maybe even bigger, and he is naming the animals.

The most conservative estimate of the number of animals that would have existed at that time is between one million and 50 million animals. So he is naming one million to 50 million animals. If you measure that out and just do a little timeline and you don't sleep, it's going to take you years and years and years just to name those animals.

And so, Adam is walking through this massive, massive, massive wilderness, and he is naming the animals. Every time he does, can't you imagine he knows he is missing something, he is yearning something, he is desiring something? He wants something outside of himself to define him, to look at him and say, "This is who you are." He wants a mirror on his soul. And so he names all the animals and no animal is quite "it." A cat definitely not, not even a dog. I mean not even a dog is that. Adam was 130 years old when Seth was born, his earlier sons were maybe 30 years younger, so maybe he has been wondering about this for 80 to 100 years.

Finally, God brings a sleep upon him and he takes a rib out of Adam's own body and molds this woman. And God puts her before Adam, and Adam looks at her and the only way that he can respond is to break out in poetry. The first poetry in the Bible: "At last, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone." Can you imagine how he must have honored and valued and treasured her the rest of his life? Do you think that he would have ever abused her? Do you think he would have ever devalued her?

But you see, even though we realize that tells me that that's my story—that I'm always looking for someone outside myself to give me worth, to give me my identity, to speak to me about who I am—that even that relationship is not enough because that relationship fell

apart. The truth is that the only way that we are going to find who we are is, yes, through each other but God through each other, Christ through each other, the eyes and the spirit of grace through each other.

I look at this Bible and I think, "Here is my story. Every single thing in my life is in here. Everything that I've ever wanted: to be loved by another person unconditionally, to be naked in front of them and to be unashamed, even though I know I've got 7.5 pounds to go. To know that it's in the cool of the day when God walks through that I have the opportunity to just speak and talk and be with him, and yet to know that in my own life I broke that. I became afraid, I became ashamed, I became whatever." You see, this is my life, this is your life. From the beginning to the very end of Scripture is every experience we've ever known. And, when we open it up, we find our story within it.

That's why in Deuteronomy we are told that we are to gather together at the Passover and celebrate it every year. We do it even in our tradition and the Jewish tradition today. At that meal, the youngest child says, "Father, why is tonight unlike any other night?" And then we start to say our story in the present tense plural so that it's if tonight this happened to us.

You see, we believe that this story is still being lived out in our lives. So when Jesus says, "Lift up your heads," don't be mesmerized anymore; don't be frozen by the chalk line anymore. Enter into a story that is so much more expansive than your own life. Enter into a story that can bring meaning to everything. Enter into it, and when you do, you will be like those two men who walked along with him on the Emmaus road who, when it was all said and done, looked at each other and said, "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*"

What happens when I open up this Word is it keeps me focused, it keeps me accountable, it keeps me hopeful. I don't know where you are in your life, but for me it's so easy to beat myself up; it's so easy for me to know my sins. I know them so well because I live them.

And yet when I open Scripture up, time and time and time and time again, God says to me, "Jim, I brought you out so that I could bring you in." I believe that what he is saying to us today is the same

thing. I believe he is saying to us, "I cannot give you the Promised Land until you decide to leave someplace else. You've got to leave something behind. It's not just about forgetting it and trying to move on. You have to make a decision to leave it behind."

You've got to say, "This anger that I'm holding, I've got to let it go." You've got to say, "These broken expectations in this relationship, I've got to let it go." You've got to say, this abuse, in some way I've got to wrestle with it, but I've got to let it go." All this--you've got to let it go. You've got to leave Egypt before you can get to the Promised Land. Though you may be feeling like you've been wandering around and trying to do it every day for even up to 40 years, God can still do it. He can do it for you if you let him.

So the question for you today is, where is your Egypt? What's holding you captive? What's preventing you from recognizing God in your life today? What is it? Is it something that happened to you? Is it something that is innate within you? Is it something...? Where are you a mesmerized chicken where you've got your head down so much and you're just trying to do it and you're trying to do it but you're not able to look up anymore.

Well, make the decision to leave that Egypt. Make the decision, "I'm not going to be this anymore. I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm not going to struggle with this anymore. I want to be a new creation." Claim that promise in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and say, "I'm going to be a new creation in Christ today." Mean it in a way that you've never meant it before and God will bless it.

If you enter Scripture and you enter his Word and you enter his faithfulness, and you let your story be part of this story, not a story of our ancestors but your story, you will hear God say, "I brought you out to bring you in" because that is what he wants and what he desires for you.

So the thing for you today is: Where is your Egypt? What is it? What are those broken dreams? What are these failed expectations? What are those addictions? What are those things that I keep going back to that I said, "Oh I'd never do that again," and I'm so tempted to go back. What is it?

Well, make the decision today to leave. And, when you make the decision today to leave, say, "Lord, let me know how I can leave it behind." And he will. Open the Bible up and just read it. I promise you he will. He will give you the spiritual eyes and the spiritual gifts to be able to accept it and receive it and to have a new life because that's what our God is. Our God is a God who delivers us even from our own selves.

Let me say, finally, that if you want to know you are making progress (this is the thing that preachers mess up a lot on, I think, at least in my tradition), I can guarantee you there is a way to quantify it, to measure whether you are making progress in this. I guarantee you I can give you a way to measure whether you are making spiritual progress in being able to leave Egypt and being able to claim the Promised Land.

Come back next week.