

My family and I just returned from a trip to California. We were able to visit my brother and his family. They live in Ventura, one block from the beach and I hate him. I'm like Joseph's brothers that Emma spoke about last week, full of jealousy. Can you blame me? It's perpetually sunny there. He told me that he goes surfing twice a week. Twice! Actually I love my brother and we had a great trip. It was winter break for my daughters, but my brother's kids were still in school, so they were gracious enough to let us borrow their car to do some traveling on our own.

We drove down to L.A. one day and I met Conan O'Brien in front of a sushi place. We drove up the coast about three hours and saw Hearst Castle, we visited the elephant seal cove up near Big Sur, and we went inland and stayed at Nacimiento Lake. I say all this because it struck me while I was preparing for this sermon how unusual it is to be able to navigate the way we do today. We were in a strange place, completely unfamiliar to us, driving around with total confidence because we knew exactly where we were at all times. GPS. Maps. They're incredible tools for us to take advantage of today. I love maps. I love to study them. With the technology at our disposal, with the touch of a finger, we can study the topography of any place in the world (in the world!). It's unbelievable. We're never lost. (Well, unless you forget to charge your battery.) The little blue dot always knows where we are.

It hasn't always been this way. Even just a few years ago, if you were in a strange place and didn't have a map, your ability to get around would be drastically different. Traveling through unfamiliar country you could get lost- truly lost. Finding your way home is incredibly challenging when you don't know where you are.

This is true not just in terms of geography, but spiritually too. The big questions we all ask: Is there a God?, Does He care about me?, Why am I here?- searching for answers to these questions can cause us to feel just as lost (as adrift) *inside* as we would if we were stranded in a strange place without a map. Some of us have spent entire seasons of our lives wandering spiritually- trying to find direction. Maybe that's why you're here today, because you're searching for a place your heart can call home. You're not alone.

That's where we find the people of Israel when we look at the fifth book of the Bible. Each week of 2016 we are making our way through the Bible as a part of a year-long journey that we're calling Garden to City. We're doing this because we believe that it's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories. Along the way we've watched God use real people, just like you and me (people with faults, and insecurities, and mess), and He brings about beauty and restoration and hope through their lives.

In our Scripture today we find Israel has been wandering through a foreign land for nearly 40 years. God's people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph have been adrift in the wilderness for decades. But this time of wandering has been as much a Spiritual condition as a physical one. We learn about it in the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is a weird word, but fun to say... Some of you think it's "Dude-eronomy" with a "d" and you're like, totally stoked. We're going to read about "the DUDE" Jeff Lebowski. Sorry- just got back from California- apologies.

It's actually Deuteronomy with a "t." This isn't the most familiar book to most of us. It's easy to find it in the Bible because it's right there in the beginning, but it's a lot more difficult to actually find yourself in the book. Some of you may question why we would choose to spend an entire series of messages here. Deuteronomy is a long book, written well before Jesus' time, and most of it concerns the details of laws that no longer apply, at least to followers of Christ. But these are the last words of Moses- his final

instructions and teachings.

From beginning to end it's a document filled with instruction and understanding on right living and relationships between people and God, and between people and their community. It's the most quoted book by Jesus and the New Testament writers; it grounded their understanding of life. Moses' words in this book were meant to give direction to a group of people who were in desperate need of it, and all these years later it continues to serve as a roadmap to knowing God. If you're looking to find your bearings, spiritually- if finding the coordinates to who God is and why you're here are important to you- then this book is worthy of our time. So let's read from it together. (Deuteronomy 1:1-3)

1 These are the words that Moses spoke to all the people of Israel while they were in the wilderness east of the Jordan River. They were camped in the Jordan Valley near Suph, between Paran on one side and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab on the other.

2 Normally it takes only eleven days to travel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, going by way of Mount Seir. 3 But forty years after the Israelites left Egypt, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses addressed the people of Israel, telling them everything the Lord had commanded him to say.

Ok that was a lot of weird names and places, but here's all you need to know: a journey that should have taken 11 days has taken the people of Israel 40 years. Now that's seriously lost! How could that happen? I don't have time to fully explain but I'll do my best to catch us all up.

When we left off last week, Emma had Joseph and his brothers living in the land of Egypt. God used Joseph to provide not only for his own family, but for an entire country during a season of great famine. But as time passed, a Pharaoh came to power in Egypt who did not know about Joseph. He viewed the Israelite people as a threat because they had grown in numbers, so he forced them into slavery and built his kingdom upon the backs of God's people. During this time of intense oppression, God heard His people's cries for help and sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt. We all know how that went. Ten plagues later- ending with the deaths of all Egypt's firstborn- Pharaoh finally released the Israelites. Then he tried to take them back, but God delivered the Israelites again, parting the Red Sea and allowing them to cross safely then bringing the waters down upon the Egyptians.

From there God leads His people, He goes before them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. He directs His people to the land of promise- a land that is rich in resources and everything to this point is so good, so perfectly tailored that nothing could go wrong, right? Unfortunately, this is the point at which the story gets messy. You see the land of promise is already occupied. Fortified cities. Fierce armies. Taking the land is not just a matter of walking in and asking them to leave.

The Israelites are flustered. They lose faith. God has miraculously delivered them, lead them, and provided for them, but here on the outskirts of the Promised Land, they stop trusting Him. They have been instructed to march into the land and take it, God has assured them He will be with them, but they refuse. When you read the rest of chapter 1 and chapters 2 and 3 you learn about what happens as a result of Israel's disobedience. God leads them back into the wilderness toward the Red Sea. None of the people who disobeyed will be allowed to set foot in the land of promise. Not even Moses. There are only two exceptions- Caleb and Joshua- everyone else will miss out, only their children will get to experience what God had in store for His people. A journey that should have taken just 11 days if they had followed the Lord's command, instead lasts 40 years because of their lack of faith.

The first three chapters of Deuteronomy explore the difficulty of Israel's wandering. Then we arrive at chapter four. This is one of the great theological chapters in all of Scripture. If you had never read anything else about God and only had the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy to study, you would find in it nearly all that God wants you to know about who He is (His character) and who He

designed us to be (His children). We can't read it all here (you'll have to make a point of reading it for yourself this week), but let me draw your attention to three short sections.

1 "And now, Israel, listen carefully to these decrees and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you. Just obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you."

What's the point of this? The point is the contrast between the ease of God's way versus the difficulty of man's way. Moses is asking them not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

We can learn from Israel's terrible blunder too. They spent 40 years in the wilderness going nowhere fast and they didn't have to. God's yoke is easy and His burden is light. (Proverbs 16:9) *"We can make our plans but the Lord determines our steps."*

Some of us, like Israel, have had to learn this the hard way. The path of obedience is one we have avoided as much as possible. We can identify with the prodigal son in Jesus' parable. Some of us have taken what we could from this life and from those around us, we've lived recklessly and selfishly, and just like the young man in Jesus' story, we've come to find the end of that path leaves us feeling empty and alone. Some of us have spent years, even decades, just like the people of Israel, learning the lesson that "our way" is difficult and costly.

I'll say this, the path of obedience might not always be easy, but it is easier than the alternative. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that you can ever manage perfect obedience- we all make mistakes. There's not a person here, me included, who hasn't walked the path of disobedience in their actions or their thoughts. I'm reminded of the story about a pastor who was saying goodbye to his congregation following a weekend service. He was met at the door by a very self-satisfied woman who told him that he "had given a good sermon on obedience," even though she didn't really need to hear it. "I haven't sinned in 29 years," she boasted. To which the pastor replied, "Wow, one more year and you'll break the record."

Perfect obedience is impossible, unless you're Jesus, but that doesn't mean that seeking to be obedient is any less worthy an aim for our lives. Obedience is the path that brings God joy, but it does more than that. Read verses 5-8 from chapter four:

5 "Look, I now teach you these decrees and regulations just as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may obey them in the land you are about to enter and occupy. 6 Obey them completely, and you will display your wisdom and intelligence among the surrounding nations. When they hear all these decrees, they will exclaim, 'How wise and prudent are the people of this great nation!' 7 For what great nation has a god as near to them as the Lord our God is near to us whenever we call on him? 8 And what great nation has decrees and regulations as righteous and fair as this body of instructions that I am giving you today?"

Those of you who are Christ followers here in this room, if I asked you how you would go about persuading a neighbor or co-worker to believe in Jesus, you'd likely answer in one of two ways. Some of you would want to tell them about Jesus- His miracles and teachings and the fact that He died for our sins but was raised to life. This is a good answer and certainly a necessary part of helping someone come to faith. But some of you would answer that question by explaining what Christ has done in your own life-personally. You would explain the difference He made, and what he means to you.

Living a life that testifies to the change God has brought about inside you and through you brings insight and meaning to those around us. It opens their eyes to who God is in a way that little else can. Peter wrote about this in his letter:

(1 Peter 3:15) *"...You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it."*

Giving a reason for what you believe- the hope you have in Christ- is magnified when our lives reflect the change that has taken place in our hearts. In His book *The Deuteronomy Project*, Richard Couser describes it this way:

"The Jewish and Christian faiths are unique among world religions; they aren't based on human thought or words alone. God has acted and does act in specific and dramatic ways in history. We have a historic faith that is based on things that actually happened, that were done with and for and in front of real people who observed and reported them. There is a powerful apologetic in (chapter four)—an answer to the skeptics, a 'reason for the hope that you have.'"

Hope. That's a word that some of you come here seeking. Some of you have been feeling hopeless. You identify with Israel's 40 years of wandering because it's ground you've walked in your own experience. I want to leave you with a final section of verses from chapter four. We've talked a lot about obedience today, and rightly so, it's the calling on our lives, just as it was for Israel. But as I mentioned earlier, perfect obedience not only implausible, it's impossible. Which leaves us in a desperate position before God. Thankfully He is more than capable of supplying forgiveness and grace for us.

Read these words with me from verses 29-31 of our text:

29 ... *From there you will search again for the Lord your God. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him.* **30** *"In the distant future, when you are suffering all these things, you will finally return to the Lord your God and listen to what he tells you.* **31** *For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon you or destroy you or forget the solemn covenant he made with your ancestors.*

These verses are the first glimpse into the grace that God provides for those who have failed to be obedient (that's Israel, yes, but it's you and me too). God promises that no matter how great the failure, and no matter how painful the resulting circumstances, when we seek Him with all our heart and soul we will find Him. We can be restored because He is gracious and will not leave us or abandon His promises.

This is the message of hope we need to remember. It's a truth that Moses will revisit in upcoming chapters. The prophet Jeremiah picks up this theme in chapters 29 through 31 of his book, and Jesus himself fulfills these words. His teachings echo Moses' words. Jesus said (Matthew 7:7-8) **7** *"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.* **8** *For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."*

In John's first letter we read (1 John 1:9)

9 *"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."*

Here at Harbor our mission is to help people find their way back to God.