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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Numbers 13: 25-33; Deuteronomy 34: 1-9; Matthew 4: 1-11
November 15, 2026

The Kind of World We Are Creating

A week ago, I wasn't able to be with you. I was visiting the Martin Luther King Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Massachusetts, and I bring you greetings from that congregation. As most of you know, that is the church that our friend Rev. Dr. TLC, Terrlyn Curry Avery, serves. It has been a blessing to have her with us over the years, and it was a blessing to be with that community a week ago. This very Sunday is the one-year anniversary of the rededication of their sanctuary after an arsonist burned the previous structure nearly seven years ago. And so our prayers are with them this morning, as they offer prayers of gratitude for all they have come through.

But since I wasn't with you last week, I wasn't able to note the extraordinary events of the past ten or twelve days. I don't assume that we all share the same opinions or outlook, but it's worth pausing to think about what occurred. This past week, in Mississippi, they elected the first Black senator from that state since Reconstruction. Not long before that, in Georgia, they elected as governor the first Black woman to hold that office in the history of our country. In Michigan, they elected the first Muslim to the U.S. Senate, ever. In New Mexico, they elected as governor the first Indigenous woman to hold that office in the history of this country, ever. In New Hampshire, they elected the first openly gay man to the U.S. Senate. And then in Texas, they elected as governor the first Latina woman to hold that office in the history of that state. That looks like a version of the United States I wish to live in. More to the point, it looks like the country we already do live in, even if far too many people have been living in denial of that fact.

But then there's this. Even though I've been a Congregationalist for nearly 14 years now, I'm actually ordained as a Presbyterian. And let's give it up for a Presbyterian seminary student by the name of James Talarico who flipped a Senate seat by talking openly about his faith, and about how the Bible he reads and the God he believes in stands in stark contrast to the policies of white supremacy, corruption, and violence that have characterized the Trump era. It turns out that Presbyterians may yet have some things to contribute to the world. That's good news for those of us in the Congregational tradition as well. If you don't fit neatly into either of those categories, let's just say that people of faith and conscience from all backgrounds, and perhaps from no particular background at all, have a lot to contribute to the world right now, as we seek to build a just and habitable future for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren.

Which brings me to the theme I'd like to explore with you today: two figures, both standing upon a mountaintop, both contemplating what the world might yet come to be. The first is Moses, standing upon Mount Nebo. The second is Jesus, standing upon a nameless mountain just prior to beginning his ministry. So very much hinges upon what happens on those two mountaintops. So much about the Bible, so much about God, but also so much about how our own world has been shaped, is contained within these two mountaintop encounters.

Before exploring those stories, I need to offer a little bit of background. Many among us have spent the past year reading the entirety of the Bible together, and I'm not going to lie - it's been a challenge. Not so much because it's a lot of reading (which it is) or because the Bible is sometimes hard to understand (which it is). Rather, it's because there's stuff in the Bible that we

understand all too well, and it can be hard to reconcile it with a vision of a loving God. But the more we've read, the more we've sensed how the Bible is in conversation with itself, sometimes correcting or revising an earlier understanding of God, in order to say to later readers, "perhaps it's not like that, but rather like this." Sometimes certain stories and symbols from the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, are taken up again in the Psalms, or the Prophets, or in the New Testament, and the perspective shifts, sometimes very dramatically. So it is with the two mountaintop stories we're considering.

You know the background of them both. In the first, Moses has brought his people through the wilderness and they are finally prepared to enter into the promised land. Just before crossing over the Jordan, Moses goes to the top of Mt. Nebo to survey all the territory that God has promised the ancient Israelites. "All this shall be given to the descendants of Abraham," the Lord God tells Moses. Moses himself is not permitted to enter that promised land because of an incident earlier in the narrative. The conquest itself - for that is what it is - is handed over to Joshua. Reading into the book that bears Joshua's name, we find that taking this land given by God requires the wholesale slaughter of the indigenous peoples who previously called it home. It requires the enactment of genocide, a task that Joshua performs without any qualms, at the behest of and assisted by…God.

To read what follows after that scene between Moses and God on the mountaintop is one of the most troubling and painful features of the entire Bible. We in the churches have been good about sanitizing it by turning it all into a metaphor - the walls of Jericho tumbling down symbolize the adversities we face, or the promised land seen from the mountaintop symbolizes an expanded sphere of freedom in the Civil Rights era. Those are powerful readings, and I have no wish to diminish them. But sometimes we also must have the courage to reckon with what actually happens in the story after the land is "given." What we find is a record of murder, destruction, and cultural erasure that has inspired colonial projects ever since, most all of it undertaken in the name of God. It was certainly the ideological backdrop that justified the genocide and cultural erasure that took place here in the United States. It's not an accident that many of the towns in New England are named after ancient biblical sites - Bethany, Bethel, Salem, Goshen, Hebron, Lebanon, and most tellingly of all, New Canaan. These are places in which the mountaintop promise given to Moses was enacted upon a wholly different people, but with a very similar result: murder and theft.

And so I think we need to be skeptical of the God who is speaking at the end of Deuteronomy. Reading between the lines of the Exodus story, I think we can discern the traces of those who were similarly skeptical, and who may have suggested not only a different understanding of God, but a way into the future that didn't depend upon militarism and violence. Which is why I've included in our readings this morning the story from Numbers about the spies who had previously entered the land. Read carefully and critically, that story opens up a different set of possibilities than what occurred after the death of Moses.

Usually, we tend to read the story of the spies entering Canaan as one of courage and cowardice. Ten of the spies are intimidated by the giants who walk the land, and they counsel against an invasion. Joshua and Caleb stand alone, arguing that the Hebrew people can overcome the challenge and defeat the enemy. Here again, we tend to treat the story metaphorically, as a story about surmounting great odds - the weak and the small can conquer giants if they but believe. And again, I have no wish to diminish those readings. But we tend not to linger upon the metaphor the story actually uses. Did you catch it? At the very end, the spies counseling against invasion say, "to us we seemed like grasshoppers."

A grasshopper is actually identical with a locust. When grasshoppers enter a swarming phase, they become aggressive, and devour everything before them. Indeed, it is a plague of locusts - grasshoppers, really - that is set upon the Egyptians when the Hebrew people are struggling to free themselves from the Pharaoh. With this carefully chosen metaphor, the spies seem to be warning that the wandering Israelites are in danger of becoming exactly like those who had previously held them captive. They suggest that to become a militaristic power, seizing the land by force, will make of the Israelites an army of devouring locusts, no better than the Egyptians they sought to flee. As the South African theologian Allan Boesak has put it, there were Pharaohs on both sides of the Red Sea - the Pharaoh they were fleeing in Egypt, and the Pharaoh they were in danger of becoming by initiating a conquest.

And so what if the spies counseling against invasion weren't doing so because of cowardice, but because they sensed a different possibility, one that didn't involve killing and the theft of land? What if they were warning against the militarism and authoritarianism that Moses and his God were exhibiting? What if, beneath the grumblings and rebellions recorded in the book of Numbers, we're actually overhearing a buried theological argument about who God is, and what God asks of people? Those arguments are clearly in play by the time we get to the Psalms, and the Prophets. In Psalm 51, for example, we find a form of religious revision, whereby God, contrary to all the instructions found in Leviticus, doesn't desire sacrifice and blood at all, but an open heart. So too, in Micah 6 we find a God who does not wish for conquest and bloodshed, but rather one who desires justice, mercy, and humility - but certainly not warfare. And in the book of Isaiah, we find one of the most beautiful visions in the entire Bible, a dream of a time when swords will be beaten into plowshares, where all violence shall cease. We can wish that those voices had prevailed when Moses was standing upon Mt. Nebo, and when Joshua unleashed his bloody conquest.

It's with all that in mind that we arrive at the second mountaintop story, meant to answer and correct the first. And we must note just how Jesus came to be standing on the mountaintop, gazing out upon the kingdoms of the world: it was the devil who brought him there. Not only that, the devil speaks in a voice that sounds an awful lot like the figure who spoke to Moses - if you will but worship me and me alone, all these lands will be yours. That is to say, if you will but use the old familiar tools, militarism and conquest, you can return the land to its former glory, making the two kingdoms great again. Sound familiar? Sure, some people will have to die, and yes, you'll have to destroy a few villages in the process. But imagine what glory, what greatness, might await if you were to take up the mantle of Joshua once again. All this I will give unto you - the land, the people, the resources, all of it.

Here we have to note something else that is very obvious: the name Jesus is, in fact, the Greek equivalent of Joshua. It is quite literally Joshua standing on top of the mountain once again. The text is going out of its way to establish parallels between those stories, but it's also saying, forcefully, that this new Joshua won't be like the old one. It's going out of its way to tell us that this new Joshua, this Jesus, will not be about militarism. It's going out of its way to tell us that the new Joshua will not be about the conquest of other peoples and the seizure of their land. He will not be about violence, or invasion, or destruction, or enslavement, or control of any kind.

His way will be one of peace. His way will be one of justice. His way will be to dwell with those beaten down by empire and conquest. His way will be to heal the brokenhearted, to release the captives, and to sit quietly with those on the brink of despair in order to call them back to the human community. His way will be to descend into the very depths of hell, to dwell

with people until they can respond to the invitation of love. His way will be to break down all the artificial barriers between nations, and cultures, and races so that we can affirm one another as members of a common human family.

When faced with the temptation to become the old Joshua - the warrior prince of conquest, Jesus is emphatic: "Away with you, Satan," he says. Or as the old song puts it so well: "Satan, your kingdom must come down."

The devil has been taking a lot of people to the top of that mountain ever since that time. The devil took some Pilgrims and Puritans to the top of the mountain and showed them North America, and they went right along with the devil and did his work. He took the Portuguese, and the Dutch, and the French, and the English up the mountain and he showed them Africa, and with the devil's help they created a hell on earth. He took the Spanish up the mountain and showed them what would soon become Cuba, and Haiti, and Mexico, and much of the Americas, and they fell for it too - they went about the devil's business. He took all of Europe up the mountain in 1884, and let them carve up and colonize the entirety of the African continent. He took the Germans up the mountain, and he showed them first Namibia, but then Poland and Ukraine and the rest of Europe. And we know it hasn't stopped there, not even a little. The devil took the President, and a few of his lackeys up the mountain not so long ago, and he showed them Iran, just the way he showed a previous President Iraq. He showed them Venezuela. He showed them Gaza. They went in for the satanic ploy, just like all the rest, and did the devil's work.

But Jesus still beckons. Jesus still calls. His voice still rings out, "Satan, your kingdom must come down!" He still invites those who can hear him into a different way of being, one that asks us to celebrate our shared humanity across religions, across nationalities, across cultures, across races, across sexual and gender expression, across all of it. Jesus, the new Joshua, invites us to enter that reality, and not the old one of conquest and pillage, as we declare together, "Satan, your kingdom must come down!"

And aren't we all up on that same mountain right now? Indeed, poised in the aftermath of a consequential election, our country, and much of the world, is up on the mountain once again, looking out. What kind of world do we want? What kind of world will we create? It's true, we don't have the kind of power that others have been given, but we do have a kind of power together, we who claim to listen to the voice of Jesus. We can demand a cessation of hostilities in Iran and in Gaza, to say nothing about other parts of the world, saying "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We can demand that the brutal economic realities of living in 2026 might be eased just a little, by raising the minimum wage - "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We can demand an end to the cruel and dehumanizing treatment of our immigrant brothers and sisters, including the abolition of the prisons and detention centers they have been subjected to - "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We can ensure that there is universal health care for all people, so that medical providers and others don't grow wealthy while the rest of us get sicker and poorer - "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We can ensure that our country's history is taught with honesty and candor, rather than suppressing uncomfortable truths for the sake of white innocence - "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We must make sure there are guardrails on tech companies and on artificial intelligence, so that humanity isn't buried under an avalanche of misinformation and distraction or worse - "Satan, your kingdom must come down." We can ensure that women have the right to choose what happens to their bodies, and we can work so that families can afford childcare, and so that children will have decent schools. To the indifference that places a higher priority upon space exploration, flying

automobiles and government cuts than on ordinary human lives, we can and must say, “Satan, your kingdom must come down.”

Instead of violence and control, we can choose to renounce the devil and all his ways. We can come down from the mountain in order to practice the way of Jesus, our new Joshua, celebrating our shared humanity, and supporting the people and the planet given to our care.

It’s the kind of world that some New England Congregationalists, joining with likeminded people near and far, just might be able to help realize. We’ve been counted out for a long time now. We’ve heard all the talking heads speak about the decline of faith traditions like ours. But we’ve read the book. We’ve been given the vision. We’re up on the mountain right now. Let us come down from it strengthened and encouraged, saying together “Satan, your kingdom must come down.” Let us create together the kind of world that Jesus has shown us. Amen.