

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Deuteronomy 31: 7-8; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-20  
 September 20, 2020

### Rebuilding the Terraces

*It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*

*-Deuteronomy 31:8*

I selected that text from Deuteronomy because it seems an apt way to mark this occasion. The Hebrew people had been wandering in the wilderness for what seemed ages. In the midst of that wandering, they were given a brief reprieve, when Moses was able to climb Mount Nebo in order to glimpse where exactly they were headed, the Promised Land toward which they traveled. They're not there yet, not by a long shot, but it's encouraging to see from whence they've come, and to know that there truly is a destination out there, however far away it might seem. It's there that Moses is relieved of his leadership, while Joshua is chosen to continue the journey. And it's there that Moses speaks the words of promise with which we began, words meant for Joshua, but words meant for all people in all times, undergoing similar travails:

*It is the Lord who goes before you; He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*

I take those words to mean that there is a loving, a gracious, and a supportive Presence that accompanied the Hebrew people through their travails, one that was trustworthy and capable of providing great strength in times of need. And I take it that that same Presence is available to all people who sojourn through painful circumstances and difficult life moments. That Presence, that Spirit, that God, will not fail or forsake, and so there is no need for fear.

It's been more than six months since we've been able to gather for worship. We began by counting the weeks, but soon lost track as they expanded into months, which now amounts to half a year. We've followed our own wilderness journey through the plague, and no one has been unaffected. Some have suffered more than others, but I know that each of us has felt the effects in our bodies, and in our souls. And though it might seem grandiose to call what we're doing today a Mount Nebo moment, this is an occasion to acknowledge how far we've come, while also anticipating what may yet be asked of us.

And so consider for a bit how far we've come. Do you remember figuring out Zoom the first few times, or the awkwardness of putting on your mask the first time you went to the grocery store? Do you remember "flattening the curve," and learning what social distancing means? Do you remember what it was like to do church online for those first weeks, as the Meetinghouse was shuttered on Sundays for the first time that anyone can recall? We're all still adjusting to those realities in many ways, but at six months, we have learned some things, and I would dare say that we've surprised ourselves with just how resilient we actually are. We're not as panicked or anxious as we were in those first weeks in March and April, and for that, we can give thanks. We've come a long way, and that's not to be underestimated.

But we also have a long way to go. Our Promised Land, the end of the pandemic, is still a long way off. It will end – of that I'm certain. Judging from past pandemics, outbreaks like Covid-19 tend to weaken in intensity after 12-18 months. That, combined with the hope of a safe and thoroughly vetted vaccine, may give us some relief in the new year. It won't happen all at once. I doubt there will be a definitive V-Day moment. But you know, relief will arrive. It is possible to gaze out and to see that moment coming, however hazy it might be. We'll have to keep going, adjusting however the circumstances require. As long as the weather holds, we'll try to hold services outdoors. But Thanksgiving will be challenging, as will Christmas. Still, we'll get through it. We'll do everything we can as a faith community to stay connected, and to find ways to care for one another, to hold onto one another, and to lift one another up. As we gaze toward what is yet to come, on the journey that remains, we need to claim those words from Deuteronomy as our own, spoken as if directly to us:

*It is the Lord who goes before you; He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*

There's another dimension of the Mount Nebo story that applies to us, and that has to do with the other crisis that's been roiling this summer – racial injustice. That too comprises a major part of the story of 2020, and it's useful to explore how the Mount Nebo story speaks to that crisis as well. It does so, first of all, by encouraging us to see how far we have come as a people struggling to end the cruel legacy of slavery and colonization. I don't wish to overstate the case, but it is worth looking back for a moment. Say the Civil War represents this country's exodus out of Egypt. We have come through that. Say that the Civil Rights Movement represents an emergence from the long wilderness wanderings of Jim Crow segregation and legal discrimination. We have come through that as well, and no one should doubt what those struggles achieved. The Mount Nebo story allows us to give thanks to God for the legacy of so many ordinary men and women, some famous, some all but unknown, who have led all of us, Black and white alike, through those wilderness moments. They are a reminder that God has gone before us, and that God has been with us.

But the story also invites us to acknowledge, in candor, just how far we have to go. This summer has exposed how vastly different are the experiences of America for white people and for people of color, and thus how close or how far that Promised Land is in our respective imaginations. Many of us who identify as white have tended to assume that, even if discrimination does still exist, it has, on the whole, been getting better. Even if there are horrifying spasms of hatred and violence sometimes, there is still, according to that storyline, an arc of racial and social progress, even if it does zig and zag. Or so the reasoning goes. Many people of color are now actively challenging that narrative, and many of us, I think, are beginning to listen. Many in Black and brown communities have known and have continued to warn us about the ugly persistence of racism - long before the election of 2016. *The New Jim Crow* sounded the alarm back in 2010, and for those who had ears to hear, there were voices pointing toward the same grim realities in the 2000's, and in the 90's, and in the 80's, when many of the achievements of the Civil Rights era were rolled back or abandoned. All along there have been prophetic voices struggling to be heard, arguing that discrimination, bigotry, and racial segregation have been worsening for a long time now. Far too few of us in the white community paid attention to such claims. But following the summer of 2020, very few of us can doubt them.

Gayraud Wilmore was a minister, civil rights leader, and a teacher of social ethics, who died this past April at the age of 98. He was one of the prophetic voices pointing out to us just how much work remained. He compared America's racial crisis to something he had witnessed in Tuscany during the Second World War, a comparison that continues to resonate. Wilmore observed that whenever there was a lull in the fighting, residents of the towns in Tuscany would emerge to begin repairing the terraces where they grew their grapes and olives. Here's what he says: "My Italian was pretty good in those days, so I asked one of them why they risked their lives rebuilding terraces with a war going on all around them." The response came: "Every winter the ground freezes, thaws – rains come and winds – maybe there's even an earthquake or a war – the soil constantly erodes, the terraces crumble and slide down the mountainside. So every year we have to build them up all over again. For hundreds of years we have done this. It is our life." Wilmore then goes on: "I believe the struggle against racism is like that...It is perennial. Every year we have to do all over again what we did to combat it last year and many years before. That should not so much discourage us as it should clarify for us what our moral obligation is in the best and worst of times. We need to know...that it falls to every generation...to rebuild the terraces."<sup>1</sup>

That statement describes the work before our country, and our congregation right now. There are people and communities all across this land who know what Wilmore is talking about, who know how to rebuild the terraces. That's because they've been doing it all along, in the best of times and the worst of times. I'm proud to say that this congregation has been one such community for many years now. Many of you have spent countless hours seeking racial justice and finding ways to diminish racial isolation. That has happened in our refugee work, and in our immigration work. It has happened in Habitat builds and in our global partnerships. It's happened in our relationships in New London – with the Homeless Hospitality Center, with the New London Soup Kitchen, with the Madry Temple. It continues to happen every week with our Food Pantry. The work you have done is enormous, and I want you to know how proud I am to be a part of such an amazing community who know what it is to rebuild the terraces.

But even so, Gayraud Wilmore is right – the terraces need to rebuilt anew. That's why even amidst the pandemic, all three of us as ministers have been spending a great deal of time this summer strategizing about ways to rebuild the terraces in this part of the world, even as other communities are doing the same in their own regions. I'd like to tell you about one such effort this morning.

Back in June, we hosted an event here on the church lawn, in which some three hundred people gathered to express their pain and their outrage, *our* pain and outrage, at the murder of George Floyd and far too many others just like him. We affirmed that Black Lives Matter, even as we acknowledged a rather uncomfortable truth: there were very few people of color among us. Ours was a sea composed predominantly of white faces, exposing just how segregated and racially isolated we are in this community. A week later, a similar event took place in Lyme, led by several courageous student leaders from the high school. And again, that painful truth was revealed: even as we rightly affirmed that Black Lives Matter, there were very few people of color among us. Despite our good intentions, we were, I must say, every bit as segregated as the communities those brave Civil Rights leaders sought to desegregate all those years ago.

Meanwhile, over in Old Saybrook, Maryam Elahi, a member of this congregation, began hosting a weekly march and teach-in that many of us have participated in. Those marches have kept our momentum alive in this region, and they've helped those of us who have been present to

---

<sup>1</sup> Journal for Preachers, Volume XXIII, Number 2, Lent 2000, pg. 34.

articulate the needs and challenges ahead of us. Those needs involve a renewed commitment to education, and to teaching the history and contributions of Black people, but also Indigenous, Hispanic and Asian, LGBTQ, Middle Eastern and so many others. It involves a commitment to work on issues related to housing, and to work with police to ensure that appropriate measures are in place to prevent the kind of harm we've seen all across the country. And it involves working to build bridges of understanding and trust with the city of New London, that the resources of communities such as this aren't hoarded for ourselves alone. Maryam is a model of what it means to rebuild the terraces, and we can be thankful for her leadership and vision.

Clearly each of our towns needs such an approach. We need it in Old Saybrook and Old Lyme, in Essex and in Deep River, and indeed, in towns up and down the Shoreline. Thankfully, that work is being done. In this town, a group that grew out of those initial marches back in June has come together to form the Lyme/Old Lyme Partnership for Social Justice, a group linked to the Old Saybrook efforts. We'll be hosting our first event this coming Wednesday evening. We'll meet here at the church at 5:30, and we'll march down Lyme Street to the Town Hall, where we'll hear from a number of speakers about how communities like this one became so racially homogenous, and how we can begin to change that, making new strides toward becoming the welcoming and hospitable community we most wish to be. As in Old Saybrook, we'll be forming working groups to address issues around housing and policing, education and a greater partnership with New London. Our hope is to create a regional alliance, where, even as we work in our local municipalities, we join together as a broader community to rebuild the terraces – or in some cases to build them for the first time. If you're so moved, we would love to see you this coming Wednesday evening. And we would welcome your help on any of the initiatives we're forming.

As with the pandemic, I believe that the words spoken by Moses on Mount Nebo are words given to each of us in this vital work:

*It is the Lord who goes before you; He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*

And so here we stand – or sit, as the case might be. Whatever our posture, it is a Mount Nebo moment for us in all sorts of ways – for the pandemic, in the struggle for racial justice, in whatever challenge we might be confronting in our lives. We have come a long way. We can and should give thanks for the strength we have been given along the way. But there is much work that remains. There are terraces to rebuild. To our confirmands, I wish simply to say that you too are an important part of this moment. I believe there is a wise and loving Presence guiding each of you, one that will help you to understand what it is to tend what has fallen into disrepair. To you confirmands, but to all of you gathered here today, and to you watching at home, I offer this word of affirmation: we are a people who know what it means to keep on rebuilding the terraces. Like those Italian residents that Wilmore encountered, we know this work in our bones. It's what we do. We stand on that promise, delivered by Moses long ago:

*It is the Lord who goes before you; He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*