

# A Strong Church and a Strong Nation

Sunday, August 29, 2021 – Outdoor Worship  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
Pastor James Haun

## Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

*So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.*

*You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—.*

Our lesson is from the fifth book of Moses which we know as Deuteronomy—a Greek word which means “second law.” This “second law” is not so much a new law as it is a retelling of the Law Moses received at Sinai. The setting for this book is forty years later and Israel is about to enter the Promised Land. In preparation for this momentous final leg of the journey, Moses again tells them the Law which was from God and was to be their guide. It was Moses’ deepest longing and passion that this nation conquer this land and live there for centuries on end, and so he does not merely retell the Law, but he preaches it with all his heart. You may have needed to hold back a yawn when I mentioned Law, as much of the Law in Moses’ writings is less than exciting reading, but this is no dry lecture. Moses wanted Israel to be a strong and enduring nation, and as we consider the current condition of our nation this sermon takes on real meaning and relevance. Let us pay careful attention, for Moses is speaking directly to us.

Moses begins by presenting the Law as a sacred treasure presented to Israel by God which must be honored. *So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe.* This may sound much like Moses’ telling of the first presentation of the Law and we have heard the command to honor God’s word on

many occasions. We know that he was correct in praising God's word, but we so easily tire of hearing commands to honor and respect it. I urge you all to consider Moses and his *heart*. Moses was not a rule-monger who always urged for rules to be obeyed only for obedience's sake. Moses realized the *meaning* of the Law. When God commanded that a certain behavior be avoided, it was because that behavior was genuinely harmful, and when God commanded a certain behavior be done, it was for the good of all. He wastes no time in explaining the importance and purpose of this Law. *So that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.* By keeping God's Law Israel would receive the skill, wisdom, and power to enter the land, occupy it and live there forever. "Trust me on this one," says Moses. He presented the Law as a source of superior wisdom. Sadly, we have come to a day when other sources of wisdom are commonly honored above God's word. Again, I ask, which remark is likely to gain the greatest attention: "Recent studies show...", "According to a recent survey..." or "Thus saith the Lord!?" We are quick to become enamored of other, inferior sources of information.

Preserving this Law is Moses' great desire. *You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.* As you hear this you may be reminded of verses very near the end of the Bible where all are strictly warned against tampering with God's words. God's word is changeless and eternal and must be treated as such. (Revelation 22:18-19) Many moderns laugh at such remarks as they point out how much the world has changed since the time of Moses. "How can an ancient law have any real application today? This law was written on clay tablets, and now we write digitally!" Yes, the world has changed tremendously, but we are the same people, and the Law still speaks eloquently to our human condition and to our only hope of salvation. Such arguments against the Law only demonstrate our pride in our own modern achievement.

Having presented the Law as our only hope, Moses proceeds to explain the benefits of keeping the commands of God. First, he points out that obedience to God's Law will make us a noticeably wise nation. *You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"* Please note that we are not talking about being a smart nation, but a wise one. It is wonderful to live in a country full of smart people and the technological advancements and medical breakthroughs which smart minds have produced are simply wonderful. Yet having said all that, we really don't need more smart people. What we truly need are wise ones! Smart has to do with the ability to absorb information and process it effectively, and this is good. Wise has to do with knowing what is truly good and what is evil, how one navigates life in a way which helps many and avoids unnecessary harm, and how we can truly be happy. Schools are well equipped to make smart people, but we need much more than that. We need Churches to make people wise. Here at St. Luke's, we

can delight in a recent crop of graduates who are so much better than merely intelligent. These are young people who are learning wisdom through strong home lives, Church involvements, Scouting, and other service activities. The world looks at these as lesser involvements, at least compared to the “more important matters” of classroom education. Let me repeat. We don’t really need more smart people. What we really need are wise ones!

We need people who embrace the right values, like family, honesty, community, and hard work. In recent decades I have heard visitors to China comment on how hard working the Chinese are, and those who have hired Mexicans regularly remark how diligently these people work. They often do the work that most Americans would not stoop to do. America has long been known for our civic organizations and community spirit, but now we find younger generations very slow to join the fire department, give blood regularly or join a civic organization. These are national traditions which are much rooted in Christian faith, and this is a wisdom which may be fading. Let us hang on to the wisdom we have received, that we may continue as a strong nation.

Moses’ next remark may seem far removed from our experience and may make some of you uncomfortable. *For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?* “Me? A person near to God?” you may say. But we are and the evidence is all around us. On our bulletin cover is a picture of George Washington kneeling in prayer. Cynical voices have been quick to explain that Washington spoke little of his faith and did not seem to be an especially religious person. He did not speak much of his faith, but there were certainly times when he did (note the prayer in the back of our bulletin) and there was a word which he frequently spoke which expressed a very profound faith: providence. God had a plan, and that plan graciously included us. Though the days were often dark for Washington he trusted in a brighter future. He knew the Gospel story and how Jesus’ sufferings were transformed into victory and glory. He well remembered his own life and how he was spared death in a nearly miraculous way during a skirmish in the French and Indian War. He trusted in our providential God and was therefore able to persevere through seven difficult years of defeats and long marches. Washington saw God’s gracious and saving hand in our nation’s formation and young life and would have gladly affirmed Deuteronomy 4:7. I am also sure that he did not do so thinking that we were a better people than any other nation. He simply knew that those who trust in God will be held close by the Almighty. God has been near to me in my own life, and I do not say this to brag, for it is all of God’s grace. We would all do well to call to mind God’s many deliverances in our lives. Perhaps you may grow tired of hearing me mention my son’s deliverance from leukemia, or my grandson’s miraculous birth, my overcoming of obstacles in my training for pastor, and other times when God has come to my rescue. All I can say is that I am sorry if you are weary of hearing these stories, but I shall keep telling them! God has drawn us near, and that is a blessing which we must advertise before the whole world!

The third and final witness to the world which Israel was called to be involved the matter of justice. *And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?* At face value it appears that God wants the world to see and be amazed by the Law, or to expand that thought and apply it to our New Testament age, the Bible. The Bible continues to change lives for it is the word of truth with power to transform sinners. Let us treasure this divine gift and be sure that the world hears the Word. We are also to be a witness to the world as a nation of just laws and fair government. In recent generations there has been an increased interest in revising and modernizing the laws of our land in hopes that this is the key to a better nation. While we are always in need of sound legislation and wise courts, we must, however, be careful that we not look to the law as our primary source of justice and moral health for our country. The real focus of this call to justice is upon a people with a healthy sense of right and wrong and a desire to see the right upheld.

Finally, Moses urges Israel to remember God's mercies as they enter the Promised Land. *But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—*. Remember *the things your eyes have seen!* Moses had a dual fear for Israel. He feared that they would be dazzled by the pagan peoples that they would encounter in this new land. It is natural for us to be impressed by something new, and while there is nothing wrong with finding something interesting, we must be careful that we not be seduced! His other concern is closely related to the first. As we may be impressed by something new, it then becomes very easy to reject and despise that which is ours and may seem old. Don't be scornful of your own heritage, insists Moses. He also knew the best way to be sure that our heritage be treasured -- remember and celebrate it! Remember what you saw over the Exodus and the many years in the wilderness! From the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, to the manna which fed them, to water which sprang from a rock, remember all that they had seen. God has your back. He did in the past and He will in the future.

How we need to remember and celebrate. I am ever amazed by how many blessings I receive in life which I so very quickly forget. Like many of you, my work requires that I present a monthly report, and I have found a lot of blessing in this exercise. So many times, have I have felt weary and wondered if I was really accomplishing anything, but as I sit down to prepare a report and consider carefully all that happened in recent weeks, I am continually amazed at how much has happened and how good God has been. We are very good at forgetting and must form habits of remembering. I have often considered writing my autobiography, not because I have an exciting life to document, but that I could tap into the thousands of blessings which I have received and then properly thank God for them.

Our lesson closes with a command that it is challenging to grasp and apply. We are told to pass these stories of God's grace and rescue on to our children and grandchildren. I suppose we have all known some elderly folks who will freely complain about kids not appreciating history and their elders' experience and wisdom and wondering why their children do not come to them longing for another lecture on "the good old days." We no longer live in an age when families were crowded together for long dark evenings, and stories were regularly exchanged. How shall we pass on the wisdom and stories of the past? The best way I know is to live a life of joyful faith and take every opportunity to pass on the Good News, and as we honor the traditions and activities of the Church let us do so, not out of mere obligation, but with a deep desire to testify to God's goodness.

Moses tells the secrets of an enduring nation. Cherish God's Law, be witnesses to the world of faithfulness, and remember God's goodness to us. And to do this most effectively, ask God to give you a heart like Moses' heart, with a passion for God's glory and a deep love for God's people. Let us weep for our people in their disobedience, let us pray fervently, and let us work for Christ. *So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.*