

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Deuteronomy 34:1-8

**SERMON TITLE:** Something More

There is a story in the Old Testament that connects deeply to my life. It helps me reflect on the direction of my life, the longings of my heart, and my own fears and failures. It's a story of Moses and the end of his journey with the Israelites.

That journey began with the liberation of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. Moses then led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years toward a land flowing with milk and honey that God had promised long before to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. This was God's dream for the people—a land of their own—beyond the oppression of Egypt and the hardships of the wilderness.

But that's not all there was to the dream. The dream also included a vision of God's people living in faithful relationship with God and one another. As it turned out, the portion of the dream involving the land proved much easier to realize than the vision of faithful living.

So as the journey neared its destination, with the land of promise in sight just beyond the Jordan River, Moses confronted a hard reality: He would be allowed to see the land of promise, but because of his own disobedience, he would not be able to enter the land with his people. The story goes like this: **STORYTELLING.**

Could you see it? As the center of this poignant story is God's dream for the Israelites. And believe it or not, God has a dream for us. Now from a New Testament perspective, it's no longer about land—but it's still about a way of life. It's about the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed. And it's a dream of *something more* for us that takes us beyond the status quo of life as we've experienced it. It takes us beyond the lives that we've built for ourselves in this American culture. It takes us beyond what we've experienced in the church—even though the church has been called to make the dream a concrete and visible reality.

When I read the scriptures, I can see this *something more*. The vision grabs me and it stirs a within me a passion that burns in my bones. And I say to myself: *Yes, this is what life looks like when God reigns—when the kingdom comes—when God’s will is done. This is what it looks like to follow Jesus. This is God’s dream for us.*

Let me give you and sample of what I’m talking about. From the book of Acts: *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common....There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*<sup>1</sup>

From Matthew’s gospel: *Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.*<sup>2</sup>

From Luke’s gospel: *When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor....But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place....For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted....When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors....But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.*<sup>3</sup>

Again from Matthew’s gospel: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*<sup>4</sup>...*Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;*

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<sup>1</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Acts 4:32, 34-35. New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Matthew 20:26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Luke 14:8, 10, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Matthew 5:44.

*and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to anyone who begs from you.*<sup>5</sup>

Now I could go on with this, but can't you already see it? God has a dream for us—a dream of *something more* that takes us beyond the status quo of life as we've known it.

But here's where the rub comes. It's one thing to see the vision and to articulate it; but it's quite another thing to put the vision into practice. A former seminary professor of mine put it this way: *Even irrepressible dreamers know that nothing is ever real until it is embodied....What counts with God and one another is not "opportunity," or even vision, but incarnation.*<sup>6</sup> In other words, God's dream for us must finally be acted upon—embodied—given flesh by ordinary human beings like you and me. Otherwise, the dream remains just a dream.

So what would it take for us to embody the dream? What would it take for us to actually live within a community of people who are committed to practicing this way of life?

Now I know from my own first-hand experience that a passion for this dream of *something more* is not enough. I've lived with this passion for thirty years or more. I've prayed fervently that God would raise up just such a community within the churches I've served. I've even discerned a personal call from God to exercise leadership in moving the church toward this vision.

But I've still come up short. To borrow a phrase from the gospels: *the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.*<sup>7</sup> Like Moses, I have my own disobedience to contend with for when it comes to God's dream of *something more* for us, I've said no. I'm not willing to pay the price of change. I lack both the faith and the courage to make the dream a reality.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Matthew 5:39-42.

<sup>6</sup> Rasmussen, Larry L. Moral Fragments & Moral Community: a Proposal for Church in Society. Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1993. 152.

<sup>7</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Matthew 26:41. New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

So I can relate to Moses. When I put myself in his shoes, I can imagine his feelings as he stood atop the mountain and looked across the Jordan River to the promised land—knowing that the dream for him would remain unfulfilled.

There is a prayer by Henri Nouwen that echoes Moses' experience atop the mountain and that also speaks for me:

*O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner....It seems to me as if I am standing on one side of a huge canyon and see how I should grow toward you, live in your presence and serve you, but cannot reach the other side of the canyon where you are. I can speak and write, preach and argue about the beauty of goodness of the life I see on the other side, but how, O Lord, can I get there? Sometimes I even have the painful feeling that the clearer the vision, the more aware I am of the depth of the canyon.*

*Am I doomed to die on the wrong side of the abyss? Am I destined to excite others to reach the promised land while remaining unable to enter there myself? Sometimes I feel imprisoned by my own insights and "spiritual competence." You alone, Lord, can reach out to me and save me. You alone....*

*"Come, Lord Jesus, come. Have mercy on me, a sinner!"<sup>8</sup>*

Now I don't know exactly what the future holds for me with regard to God's dream of *something more*. Who knows, perhaps I am *doomed to die on the wrong side of the abyss*.<sup>9</sup>

But what I know for today is that I've decided to preach faith until I have it—and in spite of my resistance to practicing what I preach, the vision remains and the question lingers: Who will lead us? Is there not at least one among us who will say yes to God's dream of *something*

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<sup>8</sup> Job, Reuben P., and Norman Shawchuck. A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants. Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1983. 288.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

*more* and show all of us the way to the other side of the abyss? God is waiting—and aren't we all?

I leave you with two questions: What is the "something more" for you? What will you do to make the "something more" a reality?