

AN INTERIM REPORT
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September 24, 2017
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Deuteronomy 8: 2 – 4, 10 - 18

I want to start by saying that I know how to deliver a “normal” sermon – but this will not be one. No Greek word studies, and no quotes from French existentialists. You see, I think I know what is on your mind. I suspect you are thinking, “Who is this strange man in our pulpit, *and why doesn't he look more like Randy?*”

So today I hope to address at least the first part of that question. I don't plan on giving you all the sordid details of my life's history – there will be plenty of time for that – but I do hope to at least highlight some of my values and interests. Then finally I want to give you what I imagine as an overarching view of our time together.

Before getting into that, however, I want to tell you a little bit about what attracted me to you. I was asked that question by your search committee, and I almost didn't know where to begin. You see I took my yellow highlighter to your Mission Information Form (MIF), and by the time I got through with it, the whole thing was glowing.

I love that you think of yourselves as **A School of Love**. Aside from avoiding churchy language, you seem to understand the goal of transformation. Far too many schools are about memorizing facts, and far too many churches are about regurgitating doctrine. Keeping with the school theme, your Adult Education and Formation program stresses *transformation*, and sees discussions of theology, spirituality, history, bible, and the arts only as serving that greater end of transformation – changed lives. In other words, you've got a brain, but you're not stuck in the head.

I love that you are committed to **Radical Hospitality**. You wouldn't believe how many churches see their greatest asset as being “friendly,” and you wouldn't believe how many of those churches unconsciously send out a barrage of messages that are not particularly welcoming. I love that you are committed to LGBTQ equality, to having difficult conversations about white privilege, and to standing in solidarity with people of other faith traditions or races that have been marginalized. Especially as we live in a time when more and more young people are not willing to put up with exclusionary thinking, a community that “chooses welcome” will stand out as a beacon of hope. I know that there are disaffected people who will weep literal tears when they find you.

I love that you are committed to a **Holistic Spirituality** where everything belongs. Rather than having a model of different faith traditions dueling with one another, we can have a compassionate model of learning from one another, where all sources of wisdom are valued. God does not need us to defend him or her. Furthermore, this holistic spirituality makes care for the environment integral to our sense of spirituality, not just an amusement for those with a liberal agenda. A holistic spirituality implies that our prime motivator is not to flee to heaven as though it were some kind of escape pod. We rather like this life that God has given us, thank you very much.

I love that you are committed to **Engaged Compassion**. Rather than being a people engaged in a massive group hug, you have discovered that personal transformation awakens in you a heart to make a difference in the world. This could involve diverse avenues such as feeding the poor, sitting with the dying, or engaging a political system in need of redemption.

I could go on, but let this all be shorthand for saying that I think I “get” you. I think we speak the same language. You’re different. I like that! As an interim pastor, I am supposed to be trained to deal with whatever may come my way. But hey. Sometimes God’s goodness manifests itself by putting us in places where we can have a good time in the process!

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OK. Since most of you have never had an Interim Pastor before, it might be good to have a little tutorial on what an Interim Pastor is and isn’t. You might think of me as keeping the plants alive and the lights on until the next long-term installed pastor has been identified. Beyond that, however, I see myself as being tasked with maintaining such a level of joy and energy and fulfillment in ministry in the present that you are less inclined to rush forward, get this interim phase behind you, and just hurry up and hire someone. Especially with churches that have had a long-term, successful, beloved pastor there is a significant risk of the next installed pastor not quite measuring up to expectations. So my goal is to take the anxiety out of this interim phase, so you can be very thoughtful and prayerful and deliberate about where you want to go from here, and what kind of person would be best suited for this unique and wonderful place. Does that make sense?

With that in mind, I *don’t* see it as my place to launch grand new initiatives just to feed my ego by doing something I have always wanted to do. I *do* think it is appropriate, and even helpful sometimes, to make little changes. Even progressive people can quickly succumb to the trap of thinking that “we’ve always done it this way.” To be clear, I swear I have nothing particular in mind when I say this, but a little change will always do you good.

Now a word to the leaders in the church. Don’t think that now that an Interim Pastor is in place, you can now kick back because someone else will start making decisions and doing the work for you. Not true! If anything, my job is to further develop and encourage you as leaders. I don’t think that this will be too hard, because I know you are already quite gifted.

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So perhaps a little about me. I’ll work in the stories of the twists and turns of my life over time, but for now let me say that I am committed to my own spiritual growth. I frankly believe that I am in a rather exciting phase of my life, and I would particularly challenge others in the second half of your life to think the same. I beg you never to become too complacent, thinking that you have arrived. I have no reason to believe that God is finished with me now, and so I have every expectation that this coming year will be a year of growth for me as well. And to be clear, when I talk about growth, I am not

referring to having more “answers.” I am referring to more of an erosion of my “false self,” and more of a discovery of my “True Self.” (I’ll be explaining more about that over time as well.) Suffice it to say that I am drawn to a more contemplative spirituality and, oddly enough, you might discover that I quote a disproportionate number of Catholic mystics.

When it comes to preaching sermons, some pastors use the curious expression of “pulling one out of the barrel.” My commitment to sharing with you from this pulpit is not to deliver messages with “yellowed edges.” For my own sake, as much as anyone else, I need to deliver a word that I find authentic, and that is touching on my growing edge.

I tend to have a dry sense of humor. Sometimes I leave people scratching their heads. “Was he serious?” Finally, I tend to whistle a lot... especially when I am not aware that others are listening.

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Finally, in a desperate attempt to relate this to our scripture reading, let’s remember Moses’ final interim report: ²Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart... ³He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Then a little later on, ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them... ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

God has been good to you over these last 41 years, but make no mistake. God is not finished with you yet! Walter Brueggemann said, **“Unlike the claims of consumer society, the [faith] community operates with a powerful vision, a vision that affirms that the future is not yet finished. God has a powerful intention and resolve to bring us to a wholeness not yet in hand.”** [Texts Under Negotiation]

So be thankful for your past 41 years, but it is time to move forward into a future vastly more creative than researching “best practices.” I firmly believe that God has a **“powerful intention”** for you that has yet to be realized.

In the meantime, I am planning on having fun during my sojourn here. I hope you will too.

Amen.

Deuteronomy 8: 2 – 4, 10 – 18 (NRSV)
A Warning Not to Forget God in Prosperity

²Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart,

whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. ⁴ The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years.

¹⁰ You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you. ¹¹ Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹² When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶ and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.