



## **FATHER'S DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, June 16, 2013**

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**Lection – Deuteronomy 1:29-31** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 29) I said to you, “Have no dread or fear of them. (v. 30) The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, (v. 31) and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place...”

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Father's Day is one of three occasions during the year when preaching can focus directly upon the much-needed topic of family life and relationships. Along with Mother's Day and Children's Day, Father's Day allows the church to celebrate the importance of family life, and also to challenge persons to live up to the roles and responsibilities. Neither of these three days should be ignored, because when considered together they afford black preachers an opportunity to ponder some of the most challenging issues facing their communities today. When you ponder the 50% divorce rate in this country and couple that with the fact that well over 50% of black children born in the last 20 years were born to single mothers, you are facing a social crisis of epidemic proportions. Through preaching, prayer, times of testimony and confession, and through the celebration of the work of faithful fathers, this day can have great significance.

#### **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship**

##### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

My father abandoned our family when I was ten years old. From that time on I have always struggled with what to do with this day. For those families where the father has been present and active with the family over the years this day is filled with joy and appreciation. However, for far too many families Father's Day is an annual reminder of an absentee father and children reared by the heroic efforts of their mothers. Several things occur in the minds of families on Father's Day: “Here is a special gift for my father” or “Who is my father?” or “Where is my father?” or “Why didn't my father want to stay with us (with me)? What did we do to make him leave?”

Preachers should not assume that everyone gathered on Father's Day is filled with warm memories about their father. That being the case, preachers should certainly begin by celebrating the faithful fathers that do exist. They must help people cope with the fact that not every family was blessed with a faithful father. Finally, the preacher should challenge every parent or potential parent in the congregation to be the very best parent they can be regardless of their own childhood experience.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The passage in Deuteronomy 1:29-31 is only a portion of a much longer story that extends to Deuteronomy 1:45. The context of the passage is the grueling experience of Israel's wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land for a period of forty years (a journey that in distance alone could have been traveled in forty days). The reason a forty-day journey ended up taking forty years to complete is at the heart of this lengthy story. More importantly, this story also offers an understanding of how God interacted with Israel in a way that offers a model for how fathers today should interact with their children.

In keeping with the meaning of the word Deuteronomy, which means *second law* or a *second recitation of the law*, this passage in Deuteronomy 1 presumes an awareness of the events in Numbers 13 when Moses sent out twelve spies to scout out the Promised Land and bring back a report on just how rich and abundant the land of Canaan really was and how wonderfully God had kept the promise of giving them a land "flowing with milk and honey." Bear in mind that after a journey of only thirty-eight days, Israel was already close enough to the land of Canaan to send out spies and have them report back within a matter of a few days. In other words, the Promised Land was only a few miles away.

When the spies returned they gave a mixed report. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, reported that the land was rich and the people who lived in Canaan were large and numerous, but that with the Lord's assistance they could conquer the land. However, the other ten spies made a far more pessimistic report; they said the land was rich, but the occupants of that land were so large and numerous that Israel would not be able to defeat them and therefore Israel would never be able to dwell in the land. When the people of Israel heard these two reports they accepted the opinion of the ten spies that said the land could not be taken.

In doing so, Israel was forgetting that the God who delivered them from Egypt, led them to Mt. Sinai, and guided them to the very edge of their Promised Land would have been able to give them victory and allow them to dwell in Canaan. As punishment for their lack of faith, God declared that except for Joshua and Caleb, no one who had come out of Egypt would be allowed to enter into Canaan. An entire nation, an unbelieving generation, would have to die off before Israel could finally enter their Promised Land; a land they could initially have entered within a matter of a few more days.

In Deuteronomy 1, the events of Numbers 13 are reviewed just before Moses was about to resume the journey to Canaan forty years later! He is reminding the present generation of Israel about two things: the faithlessness of their parents and the unabated faithfulness of God. Moses

reminds Israel that in the journey from slavery in Egypt to the verge of a new life of freedom, “God carried you, just as one carries a child...”

That is the image of fatherhood that is celebrated in this text—a father who carries or guides or sustains or supports his children through the dangers and uncertainties of life. Israel did not and could not make their journey on their own. It was by the grace and power of God that they had come that far.

God is showing us what parenting involves when Moses says that God carried us just as one carries a child. It is one thing for a woman to carry an unborn baby in her womb for nine months. It is another matter altogether to employ this biblical model of parenting and “carry children” through the trials of life throughout their life. That is the model of fatherhood and parenting that must be elevated on Father’s Day: one of devotion, steadfastness, and an unabated determination to support and sustain one’s children.

More importantly for this text, this model of parenting should be employed whether or not our children return the favor and are obedient and respectful toward us. God did not carry Israel because that nation had been faithful to God. To the contrary, God was promising to carry them despite the fact that the nation had been disobedient and faithless. As the later verses in Deuteronomy 1 reveal, God already knew that Israel would not remain faithful even when they finally entered into the Promised Land. However, that was a reflection on their character. The character of God, from the call of Abraham to the conquest of the Promised Land, was faithfulness to the original promise that a band of wandering nomads would one day be led into a rich and fruitful land of their own. What a blessing it would be to every family if every father was this faithful!

### **Challenge**

From the moment our son was born into the world in 1980, I resolved that I would never do to him what my father had done to my brother and me. You almost have to grow up without a father to realize just how important a father’s presence is in the life of a child, especially a son. I challenge every preacher to in turn challenge every father to be faithful in that important role. Any mindless male can help to conceive a child; it takes a man to stick around and be a father.

I honor the role that mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and big sisters have played in holding families together when fathers were not around. However, they would be the first to acknowledge how much easier it would have been if fathers were involved with their families. Challenge fathers to “carry their children” like God carries us: faithfully and forever!

### **Descriptive Details in This Passage**

For the sights, sounds, colors, emotions, etc., in this passage, consider the following: Deuteronomy 1:29-31 is rich in imagery, narrative, human drama, and divine pathos. The rich bounty of the land of Canaan can be considered. The irony of an entire faithless generation having to die before the Promised Land could be occupied is painful to consider, bearing in mind that even Moses was not allowed to cross over the Jordan into Canaan. The fact that the story is

about God giving Israel a second chance is a reminder that God never gives up on us even when we seem to have given up on God. This is cause for great joy! The critical issue is not just God's faithfulness to the people of Israel in general; the real issue is God keeping faith with the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This passage provides preachers with a good opportunity for biblical storytelling. If approached properly, this brief, three-verse passage would allow a creative preacher to relate the history of Israel from God's initial promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, to the fulfillment of that promise under the eventual leadership of Joshua.

### **III. Other Sermon Suggestions**

Every night at the end of his 1960s Rhythm and Blues radio-broadcast, the Chicago-based DJ Herb Kent the Cool Gent would play a gospel song recorded by the Gospel Clefs entitled "Open Our Eyes." That song was not only a call to God to take care of God's children, but it was also a call to every listener to take care of one another. On Father's Day, we need to ask God to open the eyes of every father to see not only how faithful God has been to them, but also to understand how God expects them to be faithful to their children.

It may be that younger preachers will want to draw upon the gospel music artists of their own generation, though none will have a better sound or message than the Gospel Clefs. Either way, lyrics from noted recording artists that focus on issues of family and fatherhood are a good way to reinforce both the biblical texts and the preacher's own life experience.