



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Doorway Effect**

Deuteronomy 4: 1-9

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*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 —*

There's a scientific phenomenon called "the doorway effect." If you've ever walked into the kitchen to get something, but when you got there, you couldn't remember what it was, you have experienced the doorway effect. Upon crossing the threshold of a new space, we suddenly forget the intention we so clearly set only a moment prior. Studies tell us this is due to our brain's getting overwhelmed as we process the new environment. In the living room I knew I needed scissors, but when I crossed the threshold from living room to kitchen, my brain forgot all about scissors and instead processed my new surroundings. It's at the threshold that we forget.

The story of Moses and the Israelites wandering through the desert is probably one that's familiar to you. You might remember that they are in search of a home, after being kidnapped and enslaved by the Egyptians, then set free after the Pharaoh is convinced by a series of plagues. You probably remember they are looking for the promised land. Here in Deuteronomy 4, the people are at a crossroads. They could be entering the promised land, and soon. It's so close they can almost taste it. It is in this moment that Moses takes the time to remind them about ... the law.

Christians like us tend to glaze over or zone out when hearing about the law. Some of us may have been taught that the law given by Moses was the only way for the Israelites to win God's favor, but that it was impossible to follow the law perfectly, so the law was more of a curse than a blessing. That fails to read Deuteronomy faithfully. Having the law was a point of pride. It was a kind of clarity. Simplicity. It was a closer relationship to a deity than other nations had.

The Israelites talked about the law as being a sign of God's grace. It was proof of God's nearness. It was the promise of God's covenant. To contrast the relationship the ancient Israelites had with God, listen to the words of this Sumerian prayer from about 7 BCE.

“May the fury of my lord's heart be quieted toward me. May the god who is not known be quieted toward me; may the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me. May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me; may the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me. May the heart of my god be quieted toward me; may the heart of my goddess be quieted toward me. May my god and goddess be quieted toward me. May the god [who has become angry with me] be quieted toward me; may the goddess [who has become angry with me] be quieted toward me. In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden of my god; In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess. O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.”

This goes on for several more pages. Meanwhile, the Israelites do not live in ignorance of which god they have offended and how. They are not wondering what they've done wrong or what the outcome of their actions will be. They don't wonder which god is on their side. Moses says, “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?”

The law is a celebration of God's nearness and of the knowledge of a way that leads to life and not destruction. The law is life-saving, life-giving, and obedience to this law makes ancient Israel a nation to be admired for its justice and peace.

Now, as they prepare to cross the threshold from desert to promised land, Moses says “stop.” You see, Moses is worried that the ancient Israelites are going to experience the doorway effect. Moses says, *“Hey, it's at the threshold that we tend to forget, so let's take a moment right here and get focused, because when you get into the promised land, you're going to forget that we were headed here to live in justice and peace. You're going to forget all about justice and peace and instead you're going to start looking around at all the new stuff and get yourselves all confused. Here's what we need to do. First, think back. Remember when some of our folks decided they wanted to follow some other god's law? Things ended badly for them. Remember that. You're going to have to watch yourselves now. Stay focused. And you're going to have to teach this stuff to your children, because they don't remember all that stuff that happened before. You're going to have to sit them down and explain why things are the way they are and how blessed we are to have a God who has given us this covenant and these laws instead of leaving us to wander ignorantly. Here you are standing in this threshold. Take a minute and look back so you don't forget the good, the bad, and the ugly. Look at where you are now. Stay alert. And ready yourself for what's coming. You're going to have to remember this stuff and pass it along.”*

First United, many of us stand at a threshold. A new school year, a new job, a return to in-person activities. We don't want to fall victim to the doorway effect. It's at the threshold that we tend to forget. So, look back. Remember the good, the bad, and the ugly. Remember the times we have been faithful to God's will for us to be an example of justice and peace. Remember the times we have failed to live up to God's will for us. Then, look at where we stand right now in this moment. Pay attention and stay alert. And ready yourselves for what's coming. We have so much to remember and to pass on.

*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 to your children's children. Amen.*