



April 3, 2011  
Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Moving Mountains:  
Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Nebo  
Deuteronomy 32:48-52*

You all know Martin Luther King's most famous speech. What is it? *I Have a Dream*. But do you remember his **second** most famous speech? Delivered in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968. Exactly 33 years ago today. It was the night before he was going to march with striking sanitation workers. King called his listeners to courage in the face of many threats in the past weeks. Then he continued:

*And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?*

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

The next day, Dr. King was dead; shot down by James Earl Ray. He was right. He wouldn't enter the Promised Land. But what about that mountain top? There aren't any mountains in Memphis. What was he talking about?

Well...he was talking about this morning's mountain. Mt. Nebo. Mt. Nebo rises in modern day Jordan directly across the Jordan River from Jericho. There isn't a lot on it...just a little church that commemorates what happened on that place over 3000 years ago. You see, Moses stood on that mountain top to look out over the Promised Land...the land his people were about to enter—finally! After 40 years of wanderings they had reached their destination. Only thing is...this was as close as Moses would get.

*[READ Deuteronomy 32: 48-52. 34: 1-5; 10-12.]*

So, the greatest prophet to ever come out of Israel, who knew Yahweh face to face—with 40 years of faithful service...facing down Pharaoh, performing miracles,

crossing the Red Sea, climbing up and down Mt. Sinai how many times; 40 years of putting up with whiny, complaining people meandering through the wilderness; 40 years waiting for **this day** when he would wade across the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. After 40 years, **finally** that day arrived. **Finally...**their dream would be realized...**finally** they would cross over into this land, just as God had promised.

Only one thing... Moses wouldn't join them. He could **look** at it. He could climb to the top of Nebo and gaze out over the Jordan River and palm-tree covered Jericho, but he would never set foot in there. He would die right there. Why? **Because... Moses had disobeyed God. He had dishonored the Lord. And this was his punishment.**

Wow...it must have been bad, what Moses did. Right? Say "Bad!" Must have been really bad **if**, after all those years of faithful service, God wouldn't let Moses do the one thing that he had given his whole life to...lead his people into Canaan.

So, what was this horrible thing that Moses did that got him in such hot water? What was his awful sin? *[Strike rock twice]* That's it. Moses hit a rock. Twice. Okay... there's a little more to it than that. *[Read Numbers 20:1-13]*

Can I make a confession to you? The first time I remember really reading this story, you know what I thought? Honestly? **Moses got ripped!** After all those years of faithful service...all those years putting up with whiny Israelites...**so what; he got mad at them!** Who wouldn't be mad? These people were insufferable! They were always complaining. **He strikes a rock instead of speaking to the rock. Big deal!** I'd want to strike a rock, too. Wouldn't you? In fact, if I were Moses, I think I'd want to strike more than a rock. Doesn't it seem like God is just **a little touchy?**

Here's another reason this passage can seem unfair. 38 years earlier the same thing happened. **Exodus 17: 1-7.** So, it was okay for Moses to strike the rock in Exodus but not okay in Numbers? This just doesn't seem fair, does it? Come on, God; **what's the difference?**

Well, here's the big difference. The first time, God told Moses to do what? Strike the rock. The second time, God told Moses to do what? Speak to the rock. The big difference is, Moses didn't do what God told him to do. And when you do not do what God tells you to do, there are consequences. Now we may think this was no big deal. **Talk to the rock, hit the rock...who cares?** Apparently God cared. Because what Moses did was dishonoring to the Lord.

**What? Really?** How could that be? Maybe because he lost his cool. He struck the rock in anger instead of obedience. But that wasn't the first time Moses got angry at Israel. I think it's more than that. Listen to what Moses said just before he hit the rock: **"Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?"** Did

you hear that? Who is bringing water out of the rock? We. Who we? Moses and Aaron. Do you see what just happened? Moses took credit for what God was doing. After 40 years of God's provision, God's protection, God's guidance—on the verge of entering the Promised Land where they are going to have to fight for every square inch of land against overwhelming odds, and will need to trust God to fight their battles for them—Moses dishonors God by taking credit for something only God could do.

Leaders are held to a higher standard of behavior. In that one rock-striking moment, Moses tried to steal God's glory. And God said, **"OK...you're retired."** God graciously allowed Moses to get a glimpse of the Promised Land from atop Nebo. But Moses had disobeyed the Lord and learned a hard lesson that every one of us must understand: **there are consequences to our actions. When we choose to disobey God, there are consequences.**

So what is the heresy that Mt. Nebo challenges? Here it is: **"You can't tell me what to do!"** "I am my own person, I can make my own decisions and no one has the right to tell me how to live my life. Not even God." **Is that not the battle cry of our culture today?** "You can't tell me what to do!" Has anyone besides me gotten thoroughly disgusted with the stories about Charlie Sheen? He is the poster boy for "You can't tell me what to do!" He's going to live life the way he wants to—drugs, drink, women—he's going to slander those he works with, break his contract, make a hero out of himself for his behavior, and make millions touring the country ranting and raving in person. **"You can't tell me what to do!"**

What is God's answer? "Oh yes I can! I am God. I have provided boundaries around your life...rules and laws that will allow you to live life abundantly. If you live life my way—the way I have commanded you to live—your life will be good. Best." Isn't that what Pastor Jeremy was telling us last week? God didn't give the Ten Commandments to make us miserable. He gave them because they help us live the best life possible.

Jesus did the same thing. Do you remember the Great Commission? Matthew 28: **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."**

Notice He didn't tell his disciples to **"teach them everything He had commanded."** He said, "...teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." Why? Because God's way is the best way to live! Do you remember Jesus' words in Luke 6:46: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say to you?" Our call as Christians is to obey Jesus. To live life God's way!

"But wait a second," you might reply. Isn't the gospel about forgiveness? Didn't Jesus die for my sins so that if I say, 'I'm sorry,' He will forgive me?" Absolutely!

The grace of Jesus covers our sin and saves us from God's judgment. **But it usually doesn't save us from the earthly consequences of our disobedience.** I can think of things I have done in my past...things that are shameful to me. I have asked the Lord's forgiveness for them. I know He has forgiven me. But there are still consequences for what I have done. Broken relationships; the scars of guilt. If I could live that part of my life over I would chose differently. I wish I could. But I can't. And so, I will always carry the scars of those decisions. They are healed scars, but they still mark me.

So, is there anyone here this morning who is with me on this? Who would say, "I have regrets about my past. I know I'm forgiven, but there were painful consequences: for me, for others who loved me and were counting on me. Scars. I wish I could do it over again." Anyone here?

Mt. Nebo reminds us that there are consequences to our actions. When we disobey God, **it harms us.** Even if we have good excuses! Moses had good excuses for his outburst, didn't he? He was fed up with those whiny people. Who wouldn't be? And even worse, what had just happened to him? His sister, Miriam, had just died. Couldn't they show a little compassion for a man in grief? Cut him some slack? But nooooo...they were thirsty. They wanted their water right now! **And Moses ...snapped!** Have you ever snapped! Under a lot of pressure, struggling with grief or depression or loss? And in one thoughtless moment, you say or do something that dishonors God? And it's too late! Consequences. Sometimes, heavy, horrible consequences.

This has been a tragic week of consequences in our community. We lost our third Gig Harbor High School student in a year, this time to a high speed car wreck. Whether it was just a case of reckless driving or, as seems likely, it was a decision to take his own life, there could hardly be a more vivid and painful illustration of how our actions have consequences... and in this case permanent, awful consequences. For his family; for those who loved him or liked him; and even for those who didn't know him at all but are heartbroken over this tragedy.

I feel led of the Lord to say something this morning that might seem hard. But it must be said: **There is nothing heroic about suicide.** Nothing. It is a supremely selfish act with horrific, cruel consequences...**and it is the only act that leaves everyone else to face the consequences of your decisions.** I'm not sure how much you young people are hearing this message, but you will hear at least once this morning. **There is nothing good, nothing glamorous, nothing noble, nothing heroic, nothing loving about the decision to take your own life. Nothing.** You may be remembered for it. But the question is... how will you be remembered? It is cruel and selfish and its consequences are devastating.

Do you know what God says about every single person on this earth? "You are precious to me. I love you! You are utterly unique. I created you for a purpose. I sent my Son to give his life to save yours. I long for you to know me and love me

and **live your life for me.**" But when anyone decides to end his own life—if I may put it crudely—that person is basically saying, "**Screw you, God! You can't tell me what to do!**" And every time we say that, whether with small decisions or the biggest of all decisions about life, every time we will discover that there are horrible consequences to our actions. Sometimes painful, permanent consequences like death; like never finding out what your life might have become; like sending the awful message to other wounded people that suicide might be a good solution. Well, it is **never** God's solution.

So, how are you tempted to disobey God right now? How are you striking the stone? **God says, "Life is precious.** I alone am the giver and taker of life. If you presume to play God, there will be painful consequences." And you say, "You can't tell me what to do???" **God says, "My gift of sex** belongs within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Any other kind of sex only brings painful consequences." And you say, "You can't tell me what to do???" **God says, "Be careful with your money.** Live within your means, control your spending, save more, give generously, tithe. If you don't obey me with your finances, there will be consequences." And you say, "You can't tell me what to do???" **God says, "Marriage is for life.** If you abandon your vows without doing everything you can to redeem that covenant, there will be painful consequences." And you say, "You can't tell me what to do???" **God says, "Tell the truth in all your business dealings.** Keep your word. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Control your lust. Deny yourself. Live life my way, if you don't there will be consequences. And you say, "You can't tell me what to do???"

Well, yes He can. Just ask Moses. Hundreds of you this morning are thinking about disobeying God. In big ways. In small ways. As you listen to examples that strike close to home and grow angrier by the moment, you might be thinking, "Pastor, you can't tell me what to do." But could it be that you are really saying, "God... you can't tell me what to do? I will live my life my way."

And God says, "Oh, I hope you won't do that. You see, I have a Promised Land I want you to walk in. I have a future for you that is rich and wonderful. I so want what is best for you. If you choose to disobey me, I can forgive you—I can patch together the damage that you cause—but it would be so much better for you, and for all around you—your life would be so much better, if you would just do what I tell you to do."

**"You can't tell me what to do!"** It's the cry of the spoiled child. "Please, tell me what you want me to do and I will do it, Lord." That is the cry of a child of God who lives the abundant life.

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Does God's punishment of Moses seem harsh to you? Why or why not?

2. How is it that someone can be both forgiven and still suffer consequences for their actions? Can you share a personal experience like that?

3. Do you agree that one of our cherished heresies is, "You can't tell me what to do?" Consider what the Lordship of Jesus means to you. Is there something that Jesus has told you to do...and you've refused him?