

“The Pearls of Life: Our Struggles”
Deuteronomy 32:1-10

In May of 1939, 937 refugees set sail aboard the SS St. Louis from Hamburg, Germany for Havana, Cuba. The majority of the passengers were Jews fleeing persecution by the Third Reich of Nazi Germany. The other passengers were stateless people seeking a new home. When they arrived at their destination, they were told that the Cuban government had changed their immigration policies and thus they were not allowed to get into Havana. A week before the trip, the president of Cuba had issued a decree invalidating all the recently issued landing certificates. Even though the owners of the SS St. Louis knew this, the poor refugees didn't. This was part of a larger plot of the Nazis to justify violence against the Jews showing that other countries did not want them.

Other countries were also involved in this incident. The United States Coast Guard patrolled the area near the Florida coast to ensure there would be no landing in US territories. Even the Canadian government did not accept the refugees. The ship was forced to return to Europe, and the refugees were disbursed in several countries; and many of them did not survive the war.

What does this story remind you of today? Think of the stories of many of the refugees from the Middle East trying to get into Europe or the families who were seeking refuge in our country after escaping violence in their country only to be separated with such cruelty from each other, as a “deterrent” to the so-called “illegal” immigration problem. Three of the boys rescued from the cave in Thailand and their coach are stateless, meaning that they are part of about 500,000 people who live in that country without having a citizenship status which leaves them out of many opportunities, protections, and human rights in life. It was great to see how the world united around their story of rescue once they were trapped in the cave, but what about before when children like them live in such terrible conditions? It is extremely sad to know that such stories of hate, fear, and nationalism still continue to take place today. There are so many examples of such struggles and pain for humanity today and throughout history. It is much easier to look back at history and learn from its lessons, but it is much harder to do that as we are going through them today. When our sense of security and control are at stake, it is hard to see with clarity. That is why it is important to reflect back on such experiences when we have failed as human beings to live up to God's vision in order to guard against such events and justifications today. This piece is most likely a later addition to that part of Deuteronomy because it reflects on the disobedience of the Israelites which led to the Exile. The point of having this song there is to remind and warn the people about their disobedience to God despite God's faithfulness and love. Those times in the wilderness were tough times for them and they did not always follow God's vision for their lives and for the world. Therefore, their leader was cautioning them about such mistakes. The storyline in Deuteronomy is that the Israelites were about to enter into the Land of Promise and to establish themselves as a new nation. It would have been the politically savvy thing for their leadership to just celebrate their great journey and their great fortune. It would have been a more affirming story to tell if the Song of Moses was not inserted there. The people would have felt better about their past. The politically wise thing would have been to make people feel good

about themselves and their country, but that would not have been the faithful thing to do. They needed to learn from those times in the wilderness (when they were unfaithful to God's covenant) and to reflect on those lessons so that their future would be different. Moses is presented in this story as not caring about his popularity (political polls in our day) and what it would look like for him to say some unpopular things. What he wanted was for the people to grow more deeply in their faithfulness to God. He knew that keeping their failures ever before them, was essential to their humility and to their reliance on God's grace. They needed to continue to seek God's guidance and to evolve into a more faithful people. When people think that they have arrived and that they don't need God's help or anyone's help, they may stop seeking and listening to guidance. So those times of temptation and severe pain can help teach us about doing the right thing even when it is not popular or convenient for us to seek help.

Learning from our pain and from the mistakes of the past is essential for us both on communal and personal levels. Denying such experiences or wanting to get through them as quickly as possible can deprive us of the wisdom and compassion we need to follow God's commandments and vision.

In the 2016 movie "Denial" we hear the story of Professor Deborah Lipstadt trying to present evidence in court against the denials of David Irving who is an English author and Holocaust denier. This took place in the year 2000 when Irving filed a libel lawsuit against Lipstadt's 1994 book which he claimed to damage his reputation. Here is a clip with an overview of the movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nwv60qlwmZs>

It is hard to believe that someone in our time would deny the historical facts about the Holocaust, but human beings have done this over and over again. Here are a few examples (screen):

Turkey denying the Genocide of 1.5 million Armenians during World War I
Serbia denying the Genocide of Croats in the 1990s
Rwanda's denying the Genocide of the Tutsis in 1994

Part of the problem in our world is that people feel that if we admit our mistakes, we get labeled as weak or evil and there is no way out of such labels. What ends up happening is that denial pushes our mistakes and problems into a hidden place (the unconscious level of our being) where things come out in negative ways. But in faith, we are offered a different path. In the song of Moses for today, we hear words of unconditional love and mercy to cover all of our failings and to help us to rise and try again after our failures to live by God's vision. In verse 10 we hear one of the most tender accounts of God's care and love for Jacob who had a lot of problems and mistakes, "he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye." This kind of pattern defies our normal ways of dealing with mistakes and gives us the courage to face our past mistakes to learn the lessons we need from them and to find new ways to live and to be.

Today we are invited to hold onto the Desert Pearl in our Pearls of Life. This is the pearl that represents the stresses and temptations of everyday life and the lessons they can

teach us. I invite you this week to seek the wisdom of these desert times in your life and how God might be guiding you to live differently because of those times. Reflect on how these experiences have helped you mature in your faith and in your ways of loving and serving God and others.

This is summed up concisely by Richard Rohr about admitting and letting go of our mistakes and failures, "Letting go is different than denying or repressing. To let go of it, you have to admit it. You have to own it. Letting go is different than turning it against yourself. Letting go is different than projecting it onto others. Letting go means that the denied, repressed, rejected parts of myself are seen for what they are. You see it and you hand it over to God. You hand it over to history. You refuse to let the negative story line that you've wrapped yourself around define your life."

Here is a modern-day illustration of Richard's words which comes from Veggie Tales movie "Larry Boy and the Fib from Outer space." The story is simple. It is about a little boy who breaks a nice plate and lies about it. His fib gets bigger and bigger that it was destroying him and his whole town. The hero Larry Boy, a.k.a. Larry the Cucumber, was trying to fight the giant fib but couldn't defeat it until the boy was willing to admit his mistake:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJWWaczFiv0>

So hold on to that Desert Pearl and let it help you become conscious of all the pain of the wilderness and past mistakes so that we can fully embrace God's amazing grace and love. Amen.