Today I feel a little like Captain von Trapp near the end of the Sound of Music when he announces, “My fellow Austrians. . . ..I shall not be seeing you again, perhaps for a very long time.” Except you are not Austrians, I am not about to break out in a rousing rendition of *Edelweiss* and I am not being called up to serve in the Navy of the Third Reich, but otherwise it’s the exact same thing. And so with that I guess I should offer something profound or memorable to think about while I am off enjoying sunny Kuwait with its world renowned sand storms and camel meat. But I am not sure that I can offer anything profound or life changing but I can at least look at the passage we have today from Deuteronomy and thankfully it is a farewell address, at least it is generally called the farewell address of Moses. And here again just as I am not Captain von Trapp, I am also not Moses, but I am saying farewell. And so the part I want to focus on says this, “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

As I said the context of this is Moses is saying goodbye. He is not going to Kuwait but is instead reaching the end of his life. And the Israelites who he has led all these many years are going to enter the promised land without him. And so what in many ways Moses is reminding the people is of what really matters. For as Georges Clemenceau reminds us, “The cemeteries are full of indispensable men.” Moses is reminding the people that while he may be going away, that is not what really matters, he is not that which is eternal and unchanging. But he is telling them something else and to understand that we need to think a little about a certain model of religion, which I will call the taxi cab model. Here is what I mean. Moses gives the illustration of the people asking for someone to go up to heaven or across the sea. He is warning the people that religion does not work like a taxi cab. For when you get in a cab you ask the driver to take you somewhere, which hopefully they do. But at no point in this process are we doing a whole lot. In religion this model is where the leader or holy person does all the work. They go and get some God and bring it back for the people. But Moses is telling the people something different today. He is saying that our relationship with God is not outsourced.

Before I go on let me just say that I do believe there is a reason for hierarchy in the church and that there are specific jobs that need to be filled. And the fact that the word is very near us does not mean that we can ignore the community and the roles that each of us play. The point I want to make in all of this is that our relationship to God is not wholly dependent on the decisions of others. Let me give a little illustration and see if this makes sense. When I was in San Antonio one Labor Day weekend, we sang the hymn “Come Labor On.” I assume you get why we sang it, if not I can draw you a picture after the service. Well one woman did not like the hymn and on her way out of church told me that singing the hymn completely ruined her Sunday. Somehow, in her mind, this hymn was the spiritual equivalent of one of those radar jamming planes that the Air Force flies. In some ways it was a little flattering to have that kind of power wherein I get to decided who does and who does not get to have a relationship with God. But, of course, I don’t have that kind of power. Can I help in your spiritual journey towards God? Hopefully, I mean that is part of my job. But I am not the sun and the moon. I don’t serve as the door keeper on your spiritual journey.

There is a certain type of student at Nashotah House who generally come from a Baptist background. At some point they discover liturgy and jump in with both feet. The problem is that they really don’t know when to stop. Some stay Episcopalian or Anglican, others become Roman Catholic and a few go to the Eastern Orthodox church. But even when they settle into one of these places they have trouble dealing with the church they find and try to belong to the church that they believe should exist. One such student who was from Georgia, I believe, had gone from Pentecostal, to Anglican to Episcopalian to Roman Catholic. When he go to Roman Catholicism he decided he wanted to party like it was 1499 and tried to be a member of the pre-reformation Catholic Church embracing things such as the Latin Mass and indulgences. One day at lunch he decided to regale me with the glories of his three-week-old faith by telling me how great indulgences were. His argument was that there was a giant storehouse of grace. He didn’t say where it was located, but I am guessing it near that warehouse where they put the Ark of the Covenant at the end of Indiana Jones. But he said that the Pope regulated this storehouse and dispensed grace as he saw fit. I asked him what would happen if the Pope was not around. That is where would the grace go if the Pope were not there to protect God from giving out too much grace. He did not have much of an answer except to reiterate that the Pope was awesome. But whatever the case in his mind the church needed someone to protect us from God and God’s freewheeling nature. We needed someone to go up to heaven for us.