

At the Edge of Our Sight

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

October 26, 2008

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephriam and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negab, and the Plain – that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of Palm trees – as far as Zoar.

The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendents’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

It had been a long journey – a journey that started long before Moses was a twinkle in his mother’s eye. A journey that started with a promise that God made to Abraham; a promise that God’s people would have a place, a land, a Promised Land.

Many people had sacrificed in anticipation of God’s promise. People picked up and left their homes, their families, their possessions, some even sacrificed their lives – all to experience a promise from God. Moses was one of them. As Israel’s greatest leader, Moses heeded God’s call that led him to experience some pretty incredible things, but God’s call also consumed his life.

Here, in this story, God leads Moses up Mount Pisgah set his eyes on the Promise for which he has labored, suffered, and hoped. And as he gazes over the land, God declares that Moses will not set foot within it. Then, at God’s command, Moses dies and is buried in an unmarked grave.

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Within this strange story of Moses’ death, there is a sense of reflection and peace. In this story there is a keen sense of history. An appreciation of it. And yet it is clear that even while God held Moses, an unparalleled prophet, in high esteem – the focus for the people of God was on the future.

We should always be careful comparing ourselves to the great characters of the Bible – but I believe this story of Moses holds an important lesson for us. A lesson about how to honor where we have been even while we trust the future that God promises us.

One of my mentors tells a story he heard a few years back that illustrates the point.

Down in Galveston, Texas the police were called to an elementary school. What appeared to be a pike bomb was found on the school’s playground. After studying the cylinder, the police called the bomb squad and the decision was made to detonate the device. The children were evacuated. A detonator was attached to the cylinder

and triggered. Instead of an explosion, there was a puff of white smoke. Examining the remains, the police discovered that what they had just detonated was a time capsule – buried by the children of that school in 1956. No report was given on what was inside – but you can imagine: an “I Like Ike” button, a newspaper account of Don Larson’s perfect game against the Dodgers in the World Series, a poster from the Oscar-winning movie “Around the World in Eighty Days.” A little bit of history, blown to smithereens. Not much of a loss, but a loss of history nonetheless.

When our history gets lost – when it is forgotten or destroyed – we lose our sense of rootedness and a little bit of our identity. And yet, sometimes our attachment to history can threaten to limit what possibility the future may hold.¹

Perhaps this is why this morning’s lectionary text reads the way it does – with Moses being honored as Israel’s greatest leader, and then being buried in an unmarked grave with the people he led still marching toward their future promised by God.

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This morning our Sunday School classes (will begin) began a conversation about what makes our church distinctive. We are starting these conversations now because we are undertaking a capital campaign next year; and when you make plans for the future the first step is to understand who you are and where you are going.

In the church we call that discernment. Who has God called us to be? Where is God calling us to go? These are good questions to ask, irrespective of a capital campaign.

In forming their identity, the Israelites spent a lifetime living toward a promise; living into their calling as the people of God. They walked through the desert in anticipation of a vision of the Promised Land given by God – and many who started that journey did not finish it.

¹ As found in the sermon “Unmarked Memories and The Road Ahead: by the Rev. Dr. Robert Dunham (Journal for Preachers, 1994).

What is our promise? What is this future into which God is leading us? The constitution of our church gives us a clue. Our constitution declares that we are called us to be “a provisional demonstration of what God intends for humanity.”² It is a bold vision of what it means to be church – but it is our vision. And to live into it, and to trust that God will lead us toward such a vision is our charge.

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On April 3rd, 1968 in Memphis the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before a crowd of people and said the following words:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter to me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up 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.”³

Historians have guessed as to the clairvoyant nature of King’s sermon the day before he was killed. And perhaps he knew that his time on this earth was drawing close. But what I notice in King’s sermon a keen sense of what it means to be a faithful steward; faithful in the sense of giving ourselves to some end that we will never see.

Some of you have met Dr. Allen Walworth – the man the session has hired to be our consultant for the next few months. All of us will have the chance to see Allen on November 5th when the congregation is invited to supper and to participate in a conversation that seeks to write our story in the next ten years.

In some early conversation with Allen, he asked a question that captured my attention. “Can you as a church,” he asked, “allow

² Book of Order 3.0300; with thanks to the Rev. Dr. Pete Peery – whose sermon “Eyes Fixed Ahead” helped me focus my thoughts.

³ King, Jr., Martin Luther “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” April 3, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee.

yourselves to love those people who you will never see: people who, by the providence of God, will find their way to join your membership many years from now; people who, by the providence of God, will be served by the church's outreach ministry in some distant future? Can you allow yourselves to fall in love with them, even now?"⁴

Allen's question to us makes me think about members of this church whom I have never met. Members who gave of themselves to forge this church's identity as a congregation deeply committed to mission and outreach. Members who laid the foundation for good, solid, Presbyterian Christian Education. Members who committed their energy and money and talent to start a church in Shreveport in 1845 and move it to Jordan Street in 1927. Members whose names are found in fading plaques under windows, or on pews. I have never met those members, and neither have you; neither have the countless number of people who have been affected by our church's ministry and mission. But we are all humbled by their willingness to love something and someone they would never see. Thanks be to God.

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We give ourselves – all parts of ourselves – in the service of God because as disciples of Jesus Christ we know how the story ends. Today is Reformation Sunday, and ours is a tradition that has always believed that God stands at the end of history just as God stood at its beginning; and that gives us reason to hope.

It is this kind of hope that allows us to believe that God's promise of the new heaven and new earth is sure, in spite of the story that we too often see...

Where justice and peace seem scarce;
Where the innocent suffer;
Where the hungry are without food;
Where disease is without a cure;
Where the pain of grief does not subside;
Where anxiety overwhelms.

⁴ Recounted from a conversation Dr. Allen Walworth had with the Visioning Task Force.

Those who hold believe that God is both behind us and ahead of us stand in the face of these realities and dare to say that we know how the story ends – and it ends with God; and all will be well.

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The primary theological significance of stewardship is not found in the gifts that we bring. It is not found in the dollars given to annual budgets, money left in trusts or wills to the church, or pledges to a capital campaign. All of those things are nice, but they are only a consequence of something bigger.

The theological significance of stewardship is found in placing our trust in the audacious promise of God. It is found in our ability to express and live out our faith-filled hope that dares to say “I believe” in a world that is broken and fearful. It is found in the willingness to stand within a proud history and give of ourselves to a future that, in all likelihood, none of us will have the privilege to see; but in which all of us will have privilege of participating.

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As a church, we are called to be “a provisional demonstration of what God intends for humanity.” What a charge! How foolish are we to believe that God can use us to be a beacon of light that points this city and world toward a future that is complete with justice, reconciliation, peace, and glory?

And yet every Sunday, here we gather. Hopeful; expectant; grounded in history; eyes focused on the future. A future that we know is firmly in the hand of our risen Lord who, as our bulletin affirms, offers us strength for the journey.

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