

SECOND READING: Deuteronomy 34: 1-11a

And 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 all the land... And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Bethpeor; but no man knows the place of his burial to this day. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him; so the people of Israel obeyed him, and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt.

Hebrews 11: 1,2,12-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval...From one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

“LOOSE ENDS”

At the time of his death, Moses was in a peaceful place. He was an elder statesman. He'd been blessed with good health and a long life. God had taken him up Mt. Nebo and shown him the land that has been promised to the Israelites. How amazing that must have been for Moses...to look out over the valley, and see as far as he could see, starting in the north, and sweeping west and south, and there realizing that this was the land that they had been traveling to these past 40 plus years, the land flowing with milk and honey. How gently and graciously God treated Moses in this very “fond farewell”.

But we also find that Moses was in a sad place for he was not to enter the land. It is not clear exactly why the Lord was denying Moses' entry into Canaan. But the first and probably most well-accepted reason is that Moses was being punished. Earlier in his life he made a tragic error when he was asked to carry out God's miracle to assuage the thirst of the Israelites. In Numbers 20, we read that Moses was asked to speak to a rock and it would then provide water for the thirsty people. Instead Moses got cocky and struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it, and most importantly, he admonished the people saying, “*Listen, you rebels, do WE need to bring water for you out of this rock?*”. He claimed to share credit for the miracle, rather than give it solely to God. God was not pleased and told him at that time that he would not be able to see the Land that was promised the people.(Num 20:12) Another reason suspected by scholars for his not being allowed to enter Canaan is based on the theory that Moses is a sort of suffering servant,¹ one in solidarity with the people. This comes from Moses' own words in Deut 1:37, “*Even with me the Lord was angry on your account.*” Moses, as the leader of the people, was taking on the punishment for the sin of the people. Regardless of the reason, the climax of the labor to which Moses was first called, was going to fall to another generation, and it would be led by his successor, Joshua.

It all must have been so bittersweet. I can imagine tears welling up in his eyes, can't you? I can imagine tears in his eyes as he looked over the valley and comprehended that he would not

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker. “*Commentary of Deuteronomy 34:1-12*” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id+1071 (accessed 9/24/19).

see completed the dream to which he had dedicated so much of his life. He saw the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God made, but he *“died in faith without having received them.”* (Heb 11:13).

You know, all of us will leave this world, with things undone. I bet I’m not the only one with a basket full of clothes which will likely never be mended, a pile of papers that will not likely get filed, and balls of yarn which will never be crocheted into that sweater for my husband. How many of you have something like those “learn how to speak Spanish” CDs for that trip to Spain which will likely not happen, or a box with all those pictures waiting to be placed into the album, or maybe that family tree which likely never will be done?

But more than the mundane things, all of us will leave this world with things of real significance left undone. ...**dreams and hopes**. Rev. R.S. Crilley says it rather poetically, *“When the final pattern is knit, the concluding stitch sown, and everything we’ve attempted to weave from the tapestry of life is at last unfurled, there will invariably remain a few loose threads left dangling.”*² Some of these dreams we’ve had to let go of early in our lives...like the hope that we’d get the lead in the play, or chosen for the varsity team...like the dream of being an astronaut, a supermodel, a concert pianist, or an Heisman trophy winner. Some of these dreams we’re only now realizing we won’t ever see. Maybe our sons or daughters do not appear to be interested in parenting those grandchildren we’ve always wanted, or no one is going to carry on the family business after all, or maybe that marriage has failed, or prince charming is not going to come along, or that promotion is not going to be realized, or we’re not going to get that leisurely retirement after all.

It is easy to get discouraged, may be even depressed, feeling like our lives have not been successful when we take stock of these not-to-be achieved goals. Pretty natural. If you read between the lines, we can see that Moses got discouraged, but it’s also apparent that he eventually also accepted what was to be a new purpose in life. He got a new vista. He didn’t

²Crilley RS. *“Life’s Loose Threads and The Tie That Binds”* eSermons.com. Proper 25.

just buck up and eventually accept his broken dreams as broken. He didn't just realize that was that, hard as it was. It seems that he realized that his purpose in life was far greater than his own personal fulfillment, far bigger than his peace of mind, and far more important than even his happiness. Listen to what he said in his speech on the banks of the Promised Land, "*Be strong and of good courage, for you shall go into this land. It is the **Lord** who goes before you; He will be with you, He will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed.*" (Josh 1:6) Moses, the great leader, came to know what we need to know...that we are born by God's purpose and for God's purpose only. Our life is not about us. It's not about our world-defined successes. It's not about winning, or power, status, or stuff. *It's all about God.* It's about us committing all we are to the One who created us, about surrendering ourselves to God's will for our lives. It's about walking by faith and not by sight, and all the while, pointing to God, as the source of our strength and purpose for living.

This story has spoken to people of faith, Jews and Christians, through the centuries, Jewish congregations traditionally read through the Pentateuch every year, ending with this story. That experience of being always (liturgically) outside the Promised Land is one that has helped Jews form their identity as such. For Christians, on the other hand, this story has spoken of the "already but not yet time" for us between Christ's first and second coming.³ It has given us hope to persevere in our place in God's grand story, all the while living to bring God glory.

*In one of Stanley Ott's books, he encourages leaders in the Church who have tried hard to develop programs in their churches, but have found them to not work for whatever reason. NO matter how dynamic and well trained the leaders are, no matter how much advertisement is done, no matter how much heart has gone into the programs' development, no one attends or supports them. They just don't strike a chord with the congregation. (I've been there). Ott says "Don't ever be afraid to let go of the effort, don't be afraid to let it die. Rejoice in what was done. If it was done in faith and with the intent of glorifying God, then the program's life, no matter how short was not a failure."*⁴

³ Kathryn Schifferdecker.

⁴ Stanley Ott. "*Small Group Life. A Guide for Members and Leaders.*" (Pittsburgh: Vital Faith Resources. 1994).

“If it was done in faith, with the intent of glorifying God, then its life, no matter how short was not a failure.” Remember that the next time you’re feeling regret for things not done or accomplished so differently than you’d hoped. Ask yourself, does it really matter, as long as what I’ve done was centered on God? Ask yourself also, what things must I confess and repent of which were not or are not for God’s purposes. And ask Jesus to help you redefine them, to give you a new vista where you will pursue them in faith for God’s ultimate glory.

Certainly, Martin Luther King, Jr., was thinking this when on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated, he addressed the crowd in Memphis and referred to this text saying, “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 mountaintop. I’ve been to the mountaintop and I’ve seen the promised land. 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.”

Yes, this story can continue to speak to us today, people who, even in the midst of disappointments, large and small, live by faith and not by sight in the God of Moses, the God who indeed fulfill promises, the God who will *“gather in all our loose ends and according to his will use them for his purpose even after we are received home, weaving them into the glorious patchwork quilt of life”*.

A final story...*A boy and an old man were sitting on a dock in the late afternoon, fishing. They talked about many things-why sunsets are red, why the rain falls, why the season changes, what life is all about. Finally, the young boy looked up at the old man, as the old man was baiting his hook for him, and asked, “Does anybody ever see God?” “Son,” said the old man, with his face looking forward across the blue water, “it’s getting so I hardly see anyone else.”*⁵

To God be all the glory. Amen.

⁵ Hilton CT. “In Church Management”. Quoted in: King Duncan. “One of the World’s Great Sermons.” esermos.com. 2006