

A View of the Promised Land

When Moses helped free Israel from their slavery in Egypt, they all believed they were on their way to the promised land. And they were, but it was going to be a very long way; the people of Israel spent forty long years in the wilderness. They encountered many difficulties on their journey. The Egyptian army pursued them through the desert and trapped them against the Red Sea. They went through times of hunger and thirst. There was the time when deadly snakes came into the camp, biting and killing people. Israel went through vast stretches of wilderness, and even longer stretches of time.

But God was with Israel all along the journey and the Lord worked all sorts of miracles for them. God divided the waters of the Red Sea and led the people through on dry land so they could escape the powerful armies of Pharaoh. When the people were thirsty, God commanded Moses to touch the rock with his staff and water overflowed. When they were hungry, God sent manna from heaven for them to eat. When the snakes appeared and began biting everyone, God provided them with healing.

For all that God had done for them, every time things got rough, the people of Israel would murmur and grumble. God was always faithful and steadfast, but the people were not. Over and over, they would long for the good old days back in Egypt when they had food every day. They complained that the trip was taking too long. Once, when Moses was on the mountain talking with God, they grew impatient, and began to doubt. Then they threw a wild party, and made a golden calf and shouted "Who needs God? We have our own wealth and the things that make us happy; we will worship that instead." Again and again, God would give them another chance, and

call them to live in faithfulness. But their faith never seemed to last for very long. They would complain and grumble whenever things didn't go as they expected. We sometimes worry about the grumbling and complaining that goes on in the church today. This is nothing new; it has been going on since the time of Moses.

Anyway, the people of Israel were so stubborn, and slow to trust the Lord, God eventually decided they were not ready for the promised land. A new generation would need to arise before they people could be led where God wanted to take them. So, they wandered, for forty long years. Moses was now a hundred and twenty years old. This is the story we heard from the book of Deuteronomy. One day, Moses went up from the plains of Moab, high up to Mount Nebo. And there, on the summit, God showed him the whole land, a spectacular view that included all the lands Moses and his people had not been allowed to enter. "Look at this sight," said the Lord. "This is the promised land. The land that I promised to Abraham and his descendants. The destination you have been moving toward for forty long years. I will give it to those who come after you. I am letting you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over."

Some of you may remember this scene as depicted in the grand, Hollywood movie "The Ten Commandments." At the end of the movie, Charlton Heston, who played Moses, is surrounded by his loved ones, and then as he walks away into the distance, he is magically transported into the heavens, fading off into the sunset. It is reminiscent of an old, John Wayne western, but without horse. Growing up, watching that movie each year on television, I mistakenly believed Moses never died, because that is how the movie showed it.

But we heard the story from scripture this morning. The Lord tells Moses, "Come up on the mountain. Look at this beautiful sight, what you have been working for, and

hoping for, and moving toward. So close you can see it. But you are not going in.” And here’s the next line: then Moses, servant of the Lord, died there – at the Lord’s command. A long, difficult journey, and here is how the story ends. No Hollywood ending. No fading into the sunset in Technicolor with an orchestra playing in the background. This is real life.

The scripture reminds us that it is *in* our real lives that God moves and works and brings about freedom and peace. The story of scripture reminds us that the Lord was with Israel all along the way. God was with them when they were thirsty, and when the water was flowing from the rock. God was there during the times of hunger, and when the manna and quail were raining down from the heavens. God was with them when they were being afflicted by the snakes, and when they were being healed.

Even in the Hebrew Scriptures, death does not have the final word. From the beginning, God would bring life and hope. God was so faithful that even Israel’s grumbling and sinning wouldn’t change God’s love for them. God was so faithful that even the death of Moses – the great Moses – did not signal the end of Israel’s story with God. We’re only in the book of Deuteronomy at this point, and there’s still a whole lot of scripture and history to follow. God wasn’t going anywhere. Year after year, page after page in the scriptures, God would still be active and present in the midst of God’s people. This passage shows, compassionately, and honestly, that life with God goes on. Moses died, after a good and faithful life. And then the Spirit of the Lord came fully upon Joshua, and it would come upon others, so that they too could serve God and God’s people.

Moses never did reach the promised land. He died while he was still on the journey. The scripture tells us that he was buried in a valley in Moab, but no one knows

exactly where. This is an interesting detail of the story. And as wonderful as Moses was, the greatest of all leaders, when he dies there is no monument or marker built to indicate the place of his burial. That's extraordinary. So many Biblical stories make great efforts to record those very details: Abraham and Sarah are buried in this specific place; David's tomb is marked, and visitors go there even today. But for Moses, there are no details. It is in a valley outside the promised land, and no one knows where. It is almost as if God is telling Israel, "You don't need to hang around here. Moses did his part, and others will be called to do theirs. Keep moving. You are still on the journey. I am still with you."

When I hear this story of Moses, I can't help but think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King, who worked so hard and so courageously for civil rights in this country. We are all familiar with the powerful speech he once gave when he proclaimed, "I have been to the mountaintop, and I have seen the promised land." He talked about his dream of equality and justice for everyone, regardless of their age, or gender or skin color or nationality. And he spoke with such clarity and hope and power, that others were strengthened for their journey to work and live for such a place. It was not long after this that Martin Luther King was killed.

In his last days, King probably realized, like Moses, that he may never get to the promised land, the mountaintop that God had shown him. But he had seen it, he knew it was truly there, and he was willing to give his entire life for. And he trusted that his people, and their children after them would get there. Moses, prior to his death, had his last, great, mountain-top experience with God. "Look at all you have worked for and lived for, Moses," God was telling him. "And you know what? Our people are going to get there. They will. They are on their way. You can trust that." Then Moses died, and sad as that was, the story kept going. It kept going in Joshua,

and Samuel, and in the prophets for countless generations, in Utah's Bishop Paul Jones, in Martin Luther King. In you, and me. And it is still going.

We are part of this long history of God's people. So much of the time, we tend to think that my life is all about me, and like the people of Israel, we grumble when it doesn't go our way. That is not the big message from scripture. Your life is not about you – you are to be about Life, the life God desires us to live, the big story that God calls us into. We are the descendants of this story of Moses and Joshua and all the rest. We are part of this bigger story. There are times when we have seen glimpses of the promised land, what Jesus called the kingdom of God, a place of inclusion and freedom and peace. A place where we love God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are still on the way there.

Remember Moses. On our journey with God, God doesn't ask us to be perfect, God doesn't require that we reach the promised land and achieve all our goals. God simply calls us to be faithful. God invites us to stay on the path, even when it is long and difficult. God promises to be with us. Jesus shows us the way. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 25 - 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 • Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 • 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 •

Matthew 22:34-46

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