

An Unfinished Life

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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The LORD said to Moses... “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... I will let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.”

One of the things we want in life is for everything to begin and end clearly. We like clarity; we like closure. We like stories, movies, that have a clear ending, preferably a good ending. When I was a kid, I hated television shows that would suddenly say, “to be continued.” I wanted the resolution then and not have to wait a week.

We like that in our various careers, jobs, and vocations. The bottom-line, clear job descriptions, clear chains of supervision. We like the last day of class. The first day of a new semester. The last hour of organic chemistry. The last day you put up with that professor; the last day you put up with that student. And unlike much of the rest of the world, there is always a day, sometime in May, when it’s over. Yet, most of the time, things in the “real world” are not so neat.

Beginnings and endings are not so clear-cut. There are these histories we can’t be rid of and these futures so uncertain. So many people prefer we don’t talk about those histories, and we build our walls and live in denial to try to keep the future at bay for as long as possible. In the world, there aren’t many commencements, no clear closure (which is one of our favorite words). In the real

world, things are considerably more ragged, unfinished, ambiguous.

We prefer a life with some things clearly delineated, some things with firm foundations, some things we can count on. It has long been interesting to me the correspondence in history between global crises (climate change, pandemics, political upheaval, wars, etc.) and the rise of religious Fundamentalism with its insistency on certitude, and exact, specific ways religious faith is understood, while also doubling down on everyone believing in the same way. Nationalism is the same kind of thing about the nation-state and society – reclaiming a particular identity, setting boundaries, building various walls, being clear about who is in and who is out.

Life is hard enough without it feeling unfinished, and feeling it is all up for grabs.

Which brings us to our scripture lesson for today, one of the most poignant texts in the Old Testament. Here, at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, is the conclusion to the great story of Moses and the Exodus. Second only to the story of Jesus and the Resurrection, is the importance of the Moses story in the Bible. Moses goes up on Mount Nebo, also known as Mount Pisgah, and God shows him the Promised Land in the distance. There is the Jordan River, winding its way before them, and over on the other side is the Land of Promise. This is the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob. This is the land for which the Hebrew slaves in Egypt dreamed. For 120 years, God's hand had been on Moses so that Moses would lead the people to this land. Moses, who as a baby, God protected from Pharaoh, by being hid in the bulrushes of the Nile. Moses raised as a part of the royal household in Egypt but who killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was

mistreating the Hebrew slaves. Moses then escaped to the land of Midian to live the quiet life of a shepherd. And out of this quiet life, God called him through the burning bush to become the liberator of God's people in bondage in Egypt. For the next forty years, Moses leads them out of slavery, across the parting Red Sea, through the wilderness, to Mount Sinai where he receives the Ten Commandments, and then for years of wondering in the wilderness.

Until now. Now, finally, Moses and the people are ready to go in. Their old life is ending, and their new life is about to begin.

Except Moses does not get to go in. Here, at the threshold, at the door, God does not allow Moses to go over with his people. Moses never gets to the Promised Land. Moses, the great prophet, an extraordinary servant of God. Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, did not get to go over. Instead, the writer says that God allowed him to see it from a distance. And then he died in God's care and God buried him in a place no one knows but God.

Old Moses, as great as he was, we are more like him than we realize.

There is much unfulfillment in this life, a great deal of life spent on the verge, at the door but not over the threshold, tethered to yesterday, unable to possess tomorrow. Part of our challenge is that we must, like Moses, come to terms with the incompleteness of life. So much of the business of life is unfinished.

Why was Moses denied entrance into the Promised Land? He led Israel out of Egyptian slavery, through the wilderness. Moses taught Israel the commands of God, interceded when Israel broke those commandments. Moses is therefore rightly called, "servant of God" (Deut. 34:5). If anyone should be going into the

Promised Land, it ought to be Moses. The Deuteronomist suggests that Moses violated God's law, but nothing really explains the tragedy of this last scene of Moses' life. The ancient writer says that it was because God was angry with him because of the sins of the people. Maybe. The book of Numbers says that it was because Moses disobeyed God when he struck the rock to bring forth water back in the desert instead of speaking to it. Perhaps.

Here, at the end, the ancient writer reports, but does not explain why Moses was denied entrance to the land, why his life ended within sight, but not having realized his life's goal. I think that the writer does not explain because he doesn't know. The explanations earlier in Deuteronomy and in Numbers are almost like after-thoughts, added later to make some sense about something that makes no sense to us. Moses lived 120 years and even, having lived almost two of our lifetimes, his life was unfinished. We are told only that the Lord buried Moses in a hidden grave.

How fitting of Martin Luther King to evoke this story in his last sermon. "I've been to the mountain. I've seen the Promised Land. Even if I don't get there with you. I've been to the mountaintop." King died outside the Promised Land of racial justice. He could see that promised land, but he never got there himself.

We want stories with happy endings. Boy gets girl. Girl gets boy. They live happily ever after.

Christopher Lasch's book, *The True and Only Heaven*, says that the "grand narrative" of our nation, the great "story line" of our society is faith in progress. Progress, as the grand story of ourselves, tells us that we have a definite past with which we can be done and finished, and promises an achievable future which we

can control. I would add, and when our “grand narrative” is challenged, that our history is still with us, and our achievable future might not be achievable, we don’t like it.

Sister Prejean, the nun who was famous for her work among death row in the prisons of Louisiana as well as the book and movie, *Dead Man Walking*, said that one of the reasons why she opposed capital punishment of murderers is that it doesn’t work. Families don’t feel better after the murderer of their loved one is executed. They want to see him executed again, then again. Nothing, not even execution, ends their pain, concludes the nightmare. The grief and pain continue with no resolution.

Years ago, I heard a law professor speaking on the difference between his law and our justice. “We are asking too much of our legal system,” he said. “Our courts can give you vengeance, or some punishment, or some compensation but we can’t give you complete, final justice, not in this world. Real justice is beyond our courts, it is not in this world.”

We love clean endings. Satisfying last scenes. Conclusiveness. Closure.

But this is the Bible, this is life, not the movies. Things are messier in the Bible, messier in life.

Many of us are parents. And we know that one of the most important parental virtues is patience. We parents so desperately yearn for things to go ahead and work out in our children’s lives, but we can’t force it to happen. We have to learn to practice patience – letting go.

At the same time, there are many young adults today who may not want to

go to the Promised Land if it's the land promised to their parents. Perhaps young adults face a land without all the promise we older adults thought was out there. Perhaps some of you of the younger generation are saying, "Thanks but no thanks. We still have work to do, and the future is not what it used to be, or at least what you older Moses' generation thought it was going to be. We're the Joshua generation and we have a different land in front of us.

A book I've recently read, and I know a couple of you have read is a collection of essays edited by Rebecca Solnit called *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*. The lead essay by Solnit is called "Difficult is Not the Same as Impossible," and her young co-editor Thelma Young Lutunatabua, writes one called, "Nothing is Inevitable." There is an essay entitled, "Imagination is a Muscle" and the final essay of the book is called, fittingly enough, "Not Only a Danger but a Promise."

I want you to remember that the biblical Land of Promise was filled with dangerous giants that the twelve spies came back to report that made all the Israelites look like grasshoppers in comparison. *Not Too Late* is suggesting to us all, both my generation and the younger generation, that while the promised future is dangerous and risky, it is also filled with new possibilities. And it will take a different imagination to enter this future.

Let me mention that if some of you of the younger generation are interested in a small-group study of this book and conversation let me know. We might meet once a month or twice a month or whatever you think. I know you're busy but perhaps it will help us have a transformed imagination about the future in front of us. Or perhaps you might have different ideas of how to talk about all this.

For like Moses, many of us know that life is an accumulation of decisions that could have been made differently, baggage called regret, faces we will not see again, words that came out wrong, things that don't work out as planned. Most of us don't spend much time thinking about it, and that's good, for accumulated regret, obsessive second-guessing leads to moral paralysis. People at forty "close doors more slowly," says the poet.

Here is the challenge for all of us: How to live in an uncertain world without paralysis? How can we live in unknown, changing, and what feels like and looks like a dangerous world but a world that is not inevitable. One that will take imagination that we never dreamed of before.

Knowing that we live few stories with completely satisfying conclusions and utterly happy endings can be a step toward wisdom. So the word to you today from this ending of Moses' life and the Book of Deuteronomy is for us to go ahead and live. Embrace the ambiguity. God's purposes for the world are not dependent on us getting it right. You and I can go ahead and live, not knowing how it will all turn out, and not trying to make it all turn out. As Rabbi Talfon taught (Mishnah, Sanhedrin, 2:21), "You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it."

The future is not written in stone. It's not even written.

What I'm urging this morning, is that like Moses, we learn to walk with God.

You can go ahead, venture even if you don't arrive where you planned. Even if it is much different than when you started out. I think Moses could tell us, that

sometimes, the trip itself is more interesting than its destination.

Moses could tell us, only God knows where it all leads, what it finally means. We are the story God writes. God only knows. Who we are called to be and do and where we will end up is ultimately up to God. We therefore live in the conviction that God really does put us to good purposes, even though we may not see clearly, even though we may not enter the promised land of concrete results and visible fulfillment in our exodus from here to there. God only knows for sure where we're going. God is at work all along the way.

So, hear this final word about Moses. Moses walked for 120 years with God. We know that from Moses' birth to his death that he knew God. As the writer says, Moses knew God face to face. God called Moses through the burning bush on a mountain top. And God spoke to Moses while delivering the Ten Commandments on a mountain top. And Moses life ends on a mountain top talking with his old friend, God. I wonder, if somewhere along this long journey of Moses, if his walking with God became more important than getting to go into the Promised Land? What I do believe is that Moses' walk with God over a long life-time sustained Moses no matter what the future looked like.

Sometimes, in God's presence and by God's grace, the means of our lives can become the grace-filled ends of our lives. Even though the past hangs over us and even though the future is uncertain, we can be thankful that God is walking with us and that we are walking with God. With God, the scary can become full of new possibilities. And that gives me hope.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.