

## REQUIEM FOR A LEADER

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 26, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*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 Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, 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 descendants”; 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 and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was 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.*

As I indicated last week, I will preach this Sunday and next on the topic of leadership, in no small measure due to the fact that we are facing a significant election.

In these sermons, I will turn to two different leaders that we encounter in Old Testament times to see what light their experience might shed as we choose a new leader for our time. Next week’s sermon will focus on a lesser-known king – Hezekiah. Today’s sermon draws on Moses.

Then after the election, we will hold our annual Remembrance Service – on November 9 at 11:00 – and our service this year will feature music drawn from the period of the American Revolution.

Let us pray: *O God of earth and altar, Bow down and hear our cry; Our earthly rulers falter, Our people drift and die; The walls of gold entomb us, The swords of scorn divide; Take not your thunder from us; but take away our pride. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts speak a word about leadership to a nation thirsting for such, and may my words and our meditations be acceptable in Thy sight. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

Let’s review the contributions Moses made to the people of Israel.

- Placed in a tar basket in the bulrushes as an infant<sup>1</sup> to avoid Pharaoh’s order to kill all boy babies,<sup>2</sup> rescued from the bulrushes by Pharaoh’s daughter,<sup>3</sup> raised in the court of Pharaoh by his own mother who is hired to be his nursemaid,<sup>4</sup> Moses grows up to hear God’s voice calling to him through a burning bush that is not consumed and calling him to lead his fellow Israelites out of slavery in Pharaoh’s Egypt.<sup>5</sup>
- Moses initially resists the voice, quite insistently, but finally accepts the call,<sup>6</sup> and leads the people across the Red Sea.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 1:8-22.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 2:5-8.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 2:9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:1-12.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 3:13-4:31.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 14.

- Wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the people complain about God prompting God to complain about the people; Moses is on the receiving end of both complaints, and on more than one occasion, serves as mediator between the two complainants.<sup>8</sup>
- Having led the people out of slavery and to the verge of the Promised Land, Moses watches as God crafts the people a law – the Torah – to give shape and form to their lives in the Land and receives a summary of this law – the Ten Commandments – in a face to face meeting with God on Mt. Sinai.<sup>9</sup>
- Though Moses lives to be 120 years old, he himself never enters the Promised Land. That privilege and task falls to Joshua.<sup>10</sup>
- Thus, just as Abraham Lincoln did not live to see Reconstruction and Martin Luther King to see the full fruit of integration, Moses dies before the people of Israel enter the land toward which he has led them all his life.

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The passage Casey read is a benedictory for Moses, a requiem for a leader. It pays homage to several of Moses' traits as a leader. Let's look at three of these traits as the issue of leadership is on our fevered minds as a nation.

### I.

First, it is said of Moses, at age 120: "...his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated." One translator says: "His sap had not fled."<sup>11</sup>

Doubtless, should we live to be 120, we would pray this description be applied to us. But these words need not be limited to vibrancy in old age. They point to an essential aspect of leadership in any age: Namely, the leader has to be healthy for people to be rightly led. "His sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated."

- We are in a Presidential election in which a lot is being made – beneath the surface – about youth vs. age, health vs. medical history, experience vs. newness to leadership. These are important issues, but they are not at the heart of that to which this text is pointing.
- I believe this text implies that in leadership of any kind – family, working group, church, nation or world – the heart of the leader must be healthy. The leader must be grounded, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, or the group will likely falter.

"His sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated."

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As a minister, I long ago came to realize that in order for a congregation I am leading to be able to live up to its potential, my own heart has to be healthy.

- I have to know what I am doing.
- I have to have a vision of where we are going.
- I have to believe in that vision.
- I have to be emotionally and spiritually in tune with who I am, who God has created me to be, who Christ has redeemed me to be.
- To use more "down-home" words: I have to be "right with God."

The health that starts in my own heart then has to spread to Patrick and Casey, to the Session and staff, then to the congregation as a whole.

- In any system, church or otherwise, the leader is not necessarily superior to the followers. The minister is certainly not superior to the members.
- But the leader has to be healthy for the body to flourish.

"His sight was unimpaired. His sap had not fled." Moses was healthy, and the people he led did well.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 15:22-17:7.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 19:1-20:21.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 31:1-23.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation With Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 1058-1059.

## II.

Second, the requiem shows that a leader must sometimes mediate between “what is right” and “what people want.” In Moses’ case, “what is right” corresponds with “the will of God,” which Moses had received face to face on Mount Sinai. “What the people want” fell short of the will of God.

- As soon as the people tasted freedom, they feared starvation and death and wilderness and longed for the security of slavery. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when...we ate our fill of bread; but you have brought us into this wilderness to kill us with hunger.”<sup>12</sup>
- Later, when Moses remained on the mountain to receive the finishing touches on the law, the people grew impatient and created a god of their own they could see and touch, a golden calf.<sup>13</sup>

The voice of the people, as important and powerful as it is, is not always the same as the voice of God.

- Popular will does not always represent divine will.
- Any leader must, as Moses did all his life, mediate between what is right and what is popular.
- The fact that Moses did it as well as he did is one reason children in Judaism and Christianity spend weeks, months, sometimes years studying Moses in religious education, while his brother Aaron has been reduced to a footnote in the story of the Golden Calf because Aaron so quickly gave in to popular will.

“Never since has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses,” says his requiem writer, partially because Moses was willing to bring the will of the people in line with the will of God.

## III.

Third, Moses’ willingness to put what is right above what is popular may have been one reason he himself does not enter the Promised Land. The requiem carefully notes: “[Moses] was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor,” and then poignantly adds, “but no one knows his burial place to this day.”

In mediating the delicate relationship between the voice of the people and the voice of God, a leader sometimes does not personally experience the fruit of his or her labor, the fullness of promise.

- At places the Bible seems to say that Moses doesn’t enter the Promised Land because God holds Moses accountable for the peoples’ complaining.<sup>14</sup>
- At other places, Moses appears to have been overzealous in responding to the peoples’ complaint, striking the rock of Meribah rather than simply speaking to the rock, as God had commanded.<sup>15</sup>
- Our text, on the other hand, gives no reason for Moses not entering the land himself.

Sometimes, perhaps often, the leader must depart the scene before the people can enter the land. Witness Gorbachev a decade or so ago.

In addition, the fact that Moses is buried just outside the land is a reminder that it is more important that the people being led enter the land than that a particular leader march at the head of the entry parade. I hope this is something we keep in mind November 5 and beyond.

## IV.

When years from now historians write a requiem for whomever we elect in nine days, my hope and prayer is that that requiem will be able to give thanks for the good leadership we will have chosen for our nation during a time of wilderness, leadership which will have led us, by then, to find our way as a nation to the places of promise God holds in store for us, and through us, for other nations and peoples as well.

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Exodus 16:3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 32:1-35.

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 1:34-36; 3:23-29.

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 20:1-13. Consider particularly the distinction between God commanding Moses to “command” the rock (vs. 8) and Moses “striking” the rock (vs. 11); see also Deuteronomy 32:48-52.