

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 13, 2019

Rev. Jacob Snowden

Psalm 66:1-12

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV)

Renewed Vision



The Rainbow Prophet by Yoram Raanan

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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 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 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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

God of all hope, renew our vision by your light, guiding us in the ways of faith, hope, and charity. Amen.

Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. Of course his vigor isn’t abated! He just climbed a mountain and is a dozen decades old! Do you know those chairs that people put on their stairs--the chair elevators--I’m definitely going to need one of those when I’m 120 to take my big behind to the bedroom.

Moses' story is about vision. Without closing his eyes to violence, he saw the suffering of his people in Egypt. With focus and attention he saw the burning bush that was not consumed. Now we read with sight unimpaired, he sees the panorama of the Promised Land. As we turn our gaze to the life and death of Moses, I wonder what vistas might come into our view if we look closely at this story.

Deuteronomy 34 is not only the account of the end of Moses's life, it is the end of the Torah, the whole of the Law, the most important scripture in Judaism. And, I'll tell you, this is not a "happily-ever-after" ending. Since Genesis 12, God has been trying to put a people in a promised place. In the Woods Men's Bible Study there is a copy of the Torah in the back cabinet, that task has taken 174 pages. Those aren't *War and Peace* pages, those aren't *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* pages; those are Bible pages. The entire Gospel of Mark is just 19 pages. Second and Third John and Jude--three books of the Bible--take just two and a half pages! This generations-long saga of getting to the Promised Land has taken a while. Now, with Moses on the mountain, how sweet it is to take in the view. However, the bittersweet news is that Moses does not even make it into the Promised Land! He sees it, but he is buried in the Moabite desert, in an unmarked grave, and no one to this day, the writer tells us, knows exactly where.

I like this story because it is a complex look at faith; it matches the complexities I feel in the life of faith. God is giving a gift to Moses... what a blessing to see the long awaited Promised Land, and what a blow not to inhabit it.

Can't you just imagine that for every time the Israelites had complained about a sweeter life back in Egypt, that they had grown tired of eating the same...old...manna every day for years? Moses could taste just a hint of the milk and honey that was coming. What else could keep him moving forward? While this is the first time Moses put his eyes on the land, I suppose he had seen it in every nook and cranny of his imagination. Every daydream, every fantasy, in every thousand yard stare, there was a glint in his mind's eye of this vision from atop Mount Nebo. Moses' story is about a vision that sustained Israel through the wilderness. A vision was all Moses had. The milk and honey never passed through his lips. The literal land of promise never caked on his sandals.

As much as we like happily-ever-after endings, where Moses lives out his days with grapes dangling in his mouth in the land of plenty, there is beauty in this ending too. Moses is tasked with leading Israel to the Promised Land, and he does just that. Lest a shrine be built to Moses, where people nostalgically look back to the days and ways of old, we read that a mournful people have to renew their vision and turn to Joshua if they are to have a future in the land.

It is not the case where we personally come to possess everything for which we hope and dream. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his vision, his dream, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial--where the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would sit at the table of brotherhood. In a few short years, he claimed that dream had turned into a nightmare.

On April 3rd, 1968, King spoke in Memphis at the Masonic Temple and delivered a speech entitled, "I've Been to the Mountaintop." He imagined he was granted a bird's eye view of history. He flew over Athens and Aristotle, Rome and its Republic, Renaissance Italy, and nailed his 95 Theses; but

if given the choice, he would have chosen to be dropped in his own time to see the movement of people around the world standing up for freedom and equality.

The speech ends with this reference to the very passage we've read this morning:

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've 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'm not concerned about that now.

I just want to do God's will.

And He's allowed me to go up to 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!"

The next morning, King was assassinated. No, we do not always take possession of our hopes and dreams. But if we cannot possess, can we learn from Moses on the mountain and Martin in Memphis how we can persist and pursue God and God's work faithfully?

The complexity of this semi-sweet sight of promise, in Moses and in Martin suggests that faithfulness is just as much about vision and promise as it is about accomplishment. It is good to reach to new heights and a brighter future, even if we fear letting go of pieces of our past. Robert Dunham preached in a sermon entitled, "Unmarked Memories and the Road Ahead:"

"[That] without a sense of history, we lose our identity. But freezing our history can deny us a future, a future which God intends. A road which God has set before us."

This week's sermon title is Renewed Vision. "Renew" is the theme for the Capital Campaign at Woods that will officially kick-off next Sunday. But before you start thinking about dollars and cents, nuts and bolts, I want you--and the church needs you-- to take in a broad, panoramic vision of church renewal. I want you focused on faith, not finances.

When you imagine the church at its best, what comes to your mind's eye? If we are standing on Mount Nebo, what promising places do you see, not just for yourself, but for generations to come? Where might you see the *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, as you find God's light shining around you? What role will you play as we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God?

I once was asked in a seminary class, how many bushes do you think God set afire before Moses finally realized one of them wasn't burning up? How long was God trying to get Moses' attention, to share with him a divine mission and vision? How long did Moses stare to realize something special was going on there?

What bushes have been burning for you and you've thought to yourself, I need to turn more attention there? How can we capture the light and vision in education, worship, counseling and care, child development, family support, and not just in the things we already do, but in the things we are not doing?

I love this quote from Simone Weil, who published a journal called "Waiting for God." There she said:

"Attention is the highest form of generosity, [and] absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself."

This Sunday, turn your unmixed attention to God's light and God's leadership. Where is God leading this church into the future, and even if we wander through the wilderness, how can we trust and entrust that this place will be full of promise, faith, hope, and charity?

There are so many ways our attention can be distracted. When Moses parted the Red Sea to lead Israel out of Egypt, I am convinced someone was staring at the ground and complaining, "Couldn't Moses pick a less muddy way? Did we have to go right through the water!"

The way to the Promised Land might be muddy. Manna everyday might be tiresome. I'm sure hearing about pledge cards can be. Yet, little by little, because of Moses' faithful focus on the future, he sees his way through the mud and mire of the present toward the Promised Land. If we can focus on the light and good happening in our midst, I have no doubt Woods will be a place of promise for generations to come.

I have said everything I want to say, but let me highlight just a few things:

First, every generation needs renewed vision. Nostalgia for life in Egypt and life with Moses didn't put people in the Promised Land. The people mourned the past, but ultimately turned to Joshua. Woods has done wonderful things in the past, but without renewing our vision collectively and sharing your vision personally, we freeze ourselves in the past instead of faithfully following God into the future.

Second, in the words of the prophet Mick Jagger, "You Can't Always Get What You Want," but if you try, sometimes you get what you need. For all that Moses did, he didn't inhabit the Promised Land. Jesus prayed in Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to pass by him. You might have dreams about separate private jets for Nancy, Susan, and me to do the Lord's work without baggage fees. Yet the capital campaign is focusing on other things. Faithfully pursuing our visions is a semi-sweet task. Enjoy the sweetness and take comfort in all of the people around you and after you who enjoy the benefits of your legacy of faith.

Third, Moses pushed hard for the vision he had. He climbed a mountain at 120! The road ahead may be hard--regarding the capital campaign, or who knows what else that might be in store for the future. But if we can trust that God is leading us forward, then the task is simple enough... keep your eyes open so that in time we might see what wonders God has in store. We look through a glass darkly, but have hope that one day, we will see and be seen...face to face. Amen.