

The Promised Land

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Deuteronomy 34

There is a lot of drama in the story of the Exodus – epic events filled with wondrous signs, conflict and violence, wisdom and revelation – a story on a sweeping scale of a people, a nation, Israel. And it is also the story of Moses. Moses is the person around which everything is woven: all the way from baby Moses rescued out of the Nile river; to him leading the Israelites out of Egypt – Pharaoh and plagues and Passover; to the journey to the promised land – Moses is front and center. And finally to this story of Moses' last days and his death. And I have to say, that for all the drama and epic sweep of the Exodus story, I find this last story of Moses to hold its own very well – how poignant it is, and actually, how brutal it is – by which I mean, a detail in this story that could pass you by: in Deuteronomy 34:4 we hear the LORD say to Moses: 'I am showing you the promised land which I give to your descendants – but you will not cross over into it.' Now that may sound like God is being pretty nice – Moses' days are done but he still gets to see they have arrived at the promised land; but that's not the whole story at all! The deal is that Moses is specifically EXCLUDED by God from entering the promised land – why? because at one point in the 40year Exodus wilderness journey, instead of Moses *commanding* water from a rock as God tells him to, instead Moses *hits* the rock with a stick instead – and as a consequence, Moses is told he will come to the border of the promised land, but not enter into it. Well, as the young folks would say these days: seriously? After all Moses has done?! – faced down the Pharaoh; through the Red Sea; received the 10 commandments – twice!; wandered through the wilderness for 40 years with a troublesome people – and then he hits a rock, and that's it? – no promised land?

I've always found this story very hard to take – and I want to speak up on behalf of Moses: seriously, God?

But, perhaps, we should hear what Moses has to say, as I don't recall Moses asking for my assistance. And although we do not hear Moses' voice in the passage from Deuteronomy, we do hear it in the Psalm of the day – Psalm 90. The ascription at the start of Psalm 90 is: 'A prayer of Moses, the man of God' – the only Psalm ascribed to Moses. And much of tradition and many commentators, hear Psalm 90 as a companion to, or even more an overlay on the last story of Moses at the edge of the Promised Land – Psalm 90 gives a voice to Moses – and it is a challenging and rich word for us to hear. We've heard a bit from the Psalm today in our liturgy in the opening sentences and through the hymn setting "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" – but it seems to me that we need to hear more of the Psalm to get a full sense of Moses' voice, so I've asked Jill to read some selected verses; and as you listen, think of Moses reflecting at that mountain-top overlooking the Promised Land:

Jill – Psalm 90:

¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

⁴For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

⁸You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

⁹For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.

¹⁰The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

¹²So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

¹³Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

This is a remarkable word - in modern parlance, perhaps we would say this is Moses' last lecture, passing on wisdom from a lifetime. Moses' Psalm gives a lot to think about – not easy or comfortable, but challenging and deep. And I would say first of all that I need to set aside my dis-ease with Moses being excluded from the Promised Land – focusing on that may deal with my issues, but it seems to otherwise very much miss the point. This story that I said is about Moses, seems mostly not to be. Certainly all the accolades for Moses made in the story – ‘unequaled in all of Israel; no prophet like him’ – are true and important; certainly the poignancy of the story remains. But the voice of Psalm 90 speaks to a deeper perspective on life and time and God, on disappointments and achievement, on faith and wisdom, on life and death and eternity.

I'm not so sure how often we consider such things on such a deep and broad level. Life often has enough day to day to occupy our attention; and for some life is too desperate or full to have the space for such reflection. But it's not just life's circumstances that prevent considering the voice given in Psalm 90 - it is also that we can avoid such wisdom: it can be disquieting, scary, even discouraging and depressing to have big questions asked of our lives: what is your life about? what are you a part of? what purpose and substance is there?... Well what if I don't like the answers?! – Moses' voice calls us to face challenging questions. But in those questions there is also offered deep wisdom. Let me give you a couple of examples and ideas of what that wisdom can look like, and then you can try it on for yourself and see how it fits.

In the Jewish tradition of worship, this story of Moses at the edge of the Promised Land plays an important role. In the yearly Jewish cycle of texts – their lectionary – the readings start at Genesis 1 and continue all the way to today's story in Deuteronomy 34, and then back to Genesis 1. Moses overlooking but not entering the Promised Land is

always the end of the cycle – and in that pattern is a wisdom, a tension, of faith: faith that is carried by and sees ahead the promises of God, but also knows that the fulfillment of God's calling is not claimed by one person or generation: we do not fully enter the promised land.

There was a modern prophet who called to mind this story of Moses close to his death; he did not know his death was near, but the threat was always there: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 3, 1968, in Memphis the night before he was assassinated: *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. 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.*¹

There has not arisen another prophet like Dr. King in all of America – but he knew it was not about him – there was a bigger picture. And he saw this not as despair, but as encouragement and hope – his life serving something greater and held in the promise of God's purpose and presence. And perhaps through Dr. King we have come to know too, that when one Promised Land is reached, others are always still ahead.

I've been thinking about this being Reformation Sunday, giving thanks for our ecclesial heritage – but I've been thinking of the danger in our Protestant tradition of thinking we've reached the Promised Land: '500 years ago we fixed the church – OK, all set – let's leave it at that.' Isn't it better to see that promised land always a bit beyond us? I honestly think that for many of the early Reformers, my theology today would be hard for them to recognize – and I do not say that either as bragging or as confessing; rather, the Reformation opened up wonderful paths for Christian faith to grow and thrive. But our place as Hope Church, heir of the Reformation, is not to say we have arrived, but to look ahead to God's promises, always reforming according to God's word and Spirit.

There is in the Deuteronomy 34 story a fascinating combination of past, present and future. There is reference to the past in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; there is the present moment of being on the boundary of the promised land; and then there is a subtle, fascinating reference to the future as the lands that Moses surveys are referred to by their **future** names – ‘the lands of Dan, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh’ – Israeli tribal names given even though Israel isn’t there yet! That is what it is to be at the edge of the promised land – it is past, present and future brought together not in one person, or in one people, but in the promises of God that join us with a call across all generations.

To position our faith, our lives, at the edge of the promised land is not an image of futility, but of perspective and humility; of confession and hope. For Moses, his place there at the boundary gives voice to a strikingly powerful conclusion: ‘prosper the work of our hands, O Lord, prosper the work of our hands’ – a prayer for all generations, that God will make good of our faithful lives.

It’s not about Moses - or you or me – or the Reformation or Hope Church; it’s about a history and call held together in the promises of God; it is about God: the dwelling place for all generations, a dwelling place by which we can look forward to the promised land – a promised land that in our time we could perhaps have vision to see in this way: the land of Abraham, and Sarah, and Hagar; of Isaac and Rebekah, and Ishmael; of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, and Esau – a world in which all are blessed by God’s promises. We are not yet able to enter that promised land, but I want you to know today that as a people of faith in Jesus Christ, we can see it; and God is bringing us there. Amen.

¹*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 286.