

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Dt 23:1-10

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, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The 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.” ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua 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.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Hebrews 11:4-16 (*portions*)

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts...⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.”...

⁷By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household...⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise...¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren...¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them....¹⁶ they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

“LOOSE ENDS”

At the time of his death, Moses was an elder statesman. He'd been blessed with good health and long years. Scripture tells us that before he died, God took him up Mt. Nebo and showed him the land that had been promised to the Hebrews. How amazing that must have been for Moses...to look out over the valley, to look as far as his eyes could see and realize that this was the land that they had been traveling to these past 40 plus years, the land that God had covenanted to them through Abraham, the land of milk and honey.

But Moses was not to enter the land. He was to die there “at the Lord’s command” which is literally translated, “by the Lord’s mouth”. (*motion to mouth*). Scholars propose a number of reasons as to why Moses died there and was not able to enter into Canaan.

1 The first, albeit somewhat unlikely reason, is that he was simply led up to a mountain top in order to die peacefully, of old age.

2. It has also been proposed that in death, Moses was living out the punishment God had promised him years earlier when he failed to follow the Lord’s instructions in Kadesh at Maribah. If you remember, Moses was told exactly how water was to be drawn from the rock in order to satisfy the complaining, thirsty Israelites (Num 20:12). However, in a flare for the dramatic, Moses arrogantly lifted his hand and struck the rock twice. He used the staff that GOD gave him, and got cocky, using the word, “We”. He assumed himself on a par with God as he admonished the people.

3. A third reason why Moses may have been denied entry is based on Moses’ own words of solidarity with the people, which he said when Israel refused to cross the Jordan, despite their spies bringing back encouraging reports. Moses said, “*Even with me the Lord was angry on your account.*”

But regardless of these potential reasons, it must have been bittersweet time for Moses. I can almost imagine tears welling up in his eyes as he looked over the valley and comprehended that the climax of the labor to which he'd been called and for which he'd given up a comfortable life herding sheep, that for which he'd faced down Pharoah and put up with ungrateful people for

40 + years was now eluding him. He was to look and not touch.”¹ It all was now falling to another generation. Joshua would be his successor.

You know, all of us will leave this world with things left undone. I imagine I’m not the only one with a basket full of clothes which will likely never be mended, a pile of papers that will not likely get filed, and balls of yarn on a shelf in the closet which will never be knit into that sweater for Mike. How many of you have something like “*Learn how to Speak Spanish*” CDs that have never been taken out of the package, or a box of photos waiting to be placed in the album, or maybe work on the family tree stuffed in a box on a bottom shelf? Yes, we all will leave this world with things left undone. Likely some of the things are heartbreaking for us...that is, unfulfilled dreams and dashed plans. Maybe you’re not getting to see a child grow up or a grandchild graduate, or retire and live out life together, or to travel, or marry, or write the book, or buy the home in the country. Well, these are loose ends...always a bit troubling and sometimes very painful. Rev. R.S. Crilley says it rather poetically, “*When the final pattern is knit, the concluding stitch sown, and everything we’ve attempted to weave from the tapestry of life is at last unfurled, there will invariably remain a few loose threads left dangling.*”² Similarly, the great, modern day philosopher and writer of the Harry Potter books, J.K. Rowling, says, “*There are always loose ends in REAL life*”.³

So where do we go with this text? Are we to conclude that every life is filled with unattainable aspirations, broken dreams, and that because of this, God wants us to shrug our shoulders, accept our cruel fate, and make the best of it? (*pause*) Well, I suppose that making the best of it may be true, but the rest sure doesn’t sound like the God I know, the God testified to in Scripture and in the life of Jesus Christ. Could it be that the story is saying something different, something more, something deeper?

What if we consider this particular story in terms of the larger story, God’s story? You recall that God’s overall purpose was and is to make his people, the Israelites into a people of

¹Crilley RS. Sermon: Life’s Loose Threads and The Tie That Binds. <https://sermons.com/sermon/life-s-loose-threads-and-the-tie-that-binds/1332253> (accessed 9-11-17).

²Crilley RS.

³ JK Rowling. <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/842493?ref=loose-ends> (accessed 9-12-17).

faith. Cain, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob were lifted up in our NT Scripture reading this morning and they were recognized for their faith. God's purpose was to see them and their descendants boldly name YHWH as their one true God! And it was to, out of them, bring a Savior, who would then bring the Church (*point to people*), through which he'd gather the world. **This purpose, the bigger story, could not be fulfilled if the Israelites were so dependent on Moses, if they were not free to completely depend on and follow God, right?** It all couldn't unfold if the Israelites still had Moses in their sights.

Our son, Nathan, when in college, chose to get a tattoo. We'd all talked about it beforehand, and he was aware that we knew him to be an adult and able to make up his own mind up on his own body, but we weren't real keen on the idea. However, he made the choice to do it anyway. He had it placed on his inner, upper arm, just at the level of a T shirt sleeve, which, he said was so that only he'd see it when he'd play his oboe. And he chose it to be a Bible verse, John 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease". This verse, as you may recall, was what John the Baptist said about Jesus as he was beginning his ministry and John was needing to step out of the way. Nathan told us that when he'd see his tattoo, he'd remember that his music is a gift to God, not something for his own ego. (Now, what stiff-necked parent could argue with that?) So, when Moses stayed behind, God increased for the Israelites. Murray Baumgarten says it well, "Moses, the stutterer, allowed the Hebrews to become Jews by encouraging them to tell their own story."⁴

So, ultimately, rather dying of old age, or living out a punishment, or taking it on the chin for the people, Moses' death can be understood as a gentle and gracious kiss, a farewell blessing upon his beloved servant, who was now putting the future of God's people in the hands of God! Listen to the instruction Moses gave to the people on the banks of the Promised Land, "*Be strong and of good courage, for you shall go into this land. It is the **Lord** who goes before you; He will be with you, He will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed*" (Josh 1:6).

⁴ Murray Baumgarten, "The Stutterer Moses," Western Political Quarterly, 1979:No 32:153.

Can't you just almost hear God saying to Moses, "*My purpose in you is now complete...well done good and faithful servant*" (Mt 25:23).

So, then to answer then the question about where to go with this text, we need recognize that we too are part of the God's bigger story, God's eternal story. And as such, our story, including our unfulfilled plans and incomplete dreams is significant. We are the Church, sown by Christ himself, and our lives and their inherent loose ends matter.

There was once a little girl who was finishing up the last day of preschool prior to Christmas Break. Her parents, along with many others, were patiently waiting in the school's lobby for her to be dismissed. As they came running out of the classroom, each had in their hand a brightly wrapped "surprise" for their parents, a secret project which they'd been working on for weeks. In the commotion, the little girl slipped and the "surprise" which she'd made went skidding across the tile floor with an all too obvious ceramic crash. The child's first reaction was stunned silence, then, she began to cry inconsolably. Her father, believing it best to minimize the incident patted he on the head and said, "Now, sweetheart, it's all right. It really doesn't matter." However, the child's mother, dropped to her knees, swept her into her arms and whispered. "Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal." And sharing her daughter's pain, she too began to cry. Friends, our God, is One who falls to the earth beside us, picks us and the broken dreams and unfulfilled plans in his arms and whispers, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters...eternally."⁵

Yes, we all are part of a big thing...and our story, loose ends and all, will be incorporated into God's, God's big tapestry for which all of creation is made whole and woven, bound together and to God forever. Friends, our loose ends are part of who we are, and they too will be redeemed. Think of this the next time you're feeling regret for things not done or fear that dreams will not be accomplished as you've planned. Live for God's purposes now and live bring God glory. Trust in the promises of God, and look to the time when you too will hear, "*my purpose in you is now complete...well done good and faithful servant*". Amen.

⁵ William Muehl, "Why Preach? Why Listen?" (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1986), 92.