

And the Beat Goes On
Deuteronomy 34:1-8, 10-10
for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC
14 July 2024

Our second text this morning comes from Deuteronomy, chapter 34, verses 1-8 and 10-12

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, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the 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 and 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 for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. ¹¹He 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, ¹²and 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.***

I have been thinking recently about fairy tales. We don’t watch many Disney movies anymore but every once in a while — particularly in the long, hot days of summer — *Frozen* flashes across the screen, and where one Disney movie is another follows, like a joy-filled singing virus. We’ll go from Elsa to Ursula, from *The Little Mermaid* to Robin Williams’s brilliant Genie, and then back for a second round of *Frozen* to close the loop.

Of course most Disney movies follow a similar trajectory...things are going well until they’re not. And then, at the darkest point of the film...when Jafar gets his hands on the lamp, when Scar lunges at Simba, just then there is salvation. The characters that we love, the ones we fear are close to perishing mount some victory.

Boy gets the girl, and the girl gets her legs *and* her voice, the sisters unite in a thawed world, all is happily every after. The message is clear, if not explicit: for good people things will work out. Brief hiccups lead to triumphant resolution.

As a child I took in Disney's rich narratives and comforting hues and with it a saccharine expectation for my own neatly resolved happily ever after, the kind where little girls become princesses, sneezing dwarfs manage your domestic life, and some rugs really do fly.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when, during a Seminar at PC, I discovered Hans Christian Andersen and The Brothers Grimm. Their fairy tales, many of which inspired Disney's, were familiar but had a decidedly darker twist. In Andersen's *Little Mermaid* almost nothing goes well from the start, and it all goes wildly wrong in the end. *The Arabian Nights* stories were as far from Robin Williams as Clinton is from Baghdad, and the Grimm Brothers were just that — grim. Where the stories had resolution it gnawed in its unfairness. More often than not, though, there was no resolution at all.

Like I said I've been thinking this summer about fairy tales. At the same time, because we are in a sermon series exploring the many ways God calls us, I've also been wondering what I can say to y'all about shared vocation, the calling that each of us is given in our wild, precious lives.

That's when I start to think about Moses. Not the burning bush, not the flight from Egypt, not the hijinks in Moab. What draws my attention is Mount Nebo ... An old prophet surveying the Promised Land. What draws my attention is endings.

Over here in Greenville in the 21st century we may not know burning bushes,
or seas standing on their sides;
we may not have the power to shout down kings,
or summon plagues,

but each of us knows about endings.

Moses's story begins with Abraham, with the first passage we read today. After God creates the world and goes through a revision or two, God settles on some this-or-that elderly fellow and decides that through this otherwise unremarkable man, the world will receive divine presence. God binds himself to Abraham and Abraham is given a promise. From his hitherto nonexistent progeny will come blessing and land. And indeed Abraham does have a son — two, actually — and by those sons the blessing begins to unfold.

But the land remains elusive. Six generations rise and fall. The Promised Land remains just that, a promise. Until Moses.

Torah — the first five books of Jewish Scripture and ours — is the story of the land and the liberator. It is Moses’s story:

- Moses, sent down the river before ending up in Pharaoh’s household.
- Moses, going toe-to-toe with Egyptian slavemasters and with Pharaoh himself,
- Moses working wonders until the Hebrew people are freed;
- Moses, in the wilderness going up the mountain to speak with God and returning with Commandments and law;
- Moses, who anoints leaders and settles quarrels;
- Moses who leads the people despite their rebellion, who wanders with them for forty years, who brings water from the rock and witnesses to the manna from heaven.
- Moses on the edge of the promised land.

Everything in Moses’s life anticipates the acquisition of the land. When we come to the end of *Torah*, to the final chapters of *Deuteronomy*, only one thing remains entering the land.

In our text today, Moses stands on the cusp of inevitability, he looks across the vast horizon of the promise, and he surveys his life’s work.

He is close enough that he could reach it in a day, and just then, his story comes to an end.

The text I read today is the closing chapter of *Torah*. What began with Abraham ends, not in the promised land, but at an unmarked grave. Moses, like all people, is buried deep in the earth.

Torah ends in anticlimax. Moses’ story is unresolved. The great leader dies. Grief settles among the Israelites, coming, as it does, in unending waves. The people, like us, longed for inevitabilities, for predictable “happily ever afters.”

But there is no Disney ending for this prince of Egypt.

The collection of writings we know as *Deuteronomy* was codified generations after Moses’s death. Not only had the land been conquered by the time of its composition, the Israelite kingdom had been built...and then fallen. In what was left of the kingdom, somewhere in southern Judah, royal scribes diligently put to paper the stories of Israel’s beginning: the law, the wanderings, and the great man Moses. But even those generations later the grim ending was

unsettling for the Scribes. Within *Deuteronomy* there is no clear consensus, no easy reason, offered for Moses's exclusion from the land. In one place it is recorded that Moses's own folly led to his exile. Another Scribe blames the Israelites. Whatever it was, it was final. Moses's story ends on the cusp of the promise.

The man whose life began in the low-plains of the Nile is buried by his God on a high mountain overlooking the land he worked for, prayed for, and fought for, but would never see.

An ending right there in the middle.
And a haunting fear that if even Moses missed his Disney ending we might could too.

My grandmother was a personality. In my memory she's always in her chair, which had clear sight lines to the TV and the front door. The moment you walked in she'd pull you in and demand some sugar. Her house, a modest ranch in the middle of my late grandfather's sprawling farm, was our family's hub. My mother and her sisters flitted about while the cousins got up to mischief on the farm or in the treasure-filled basement.

When she died I was living in New Jersey. After having a stroke she was airlifted here, to Greenville Memorial, but as it turns out she would, as her children suspected, rather die than attend her own 90th birthday party.

Now — and I promise this is going somewhere — as it happens *Game of Thrones* had just debuted on HBO to critical fanfare. I couldn't afford HBO but I conned my way into a group that gathered weekly to watch the show and debate its merits. Here I was, a 25 year old working at the local Presbyterian church, debating mythology with a Priest, a biblical scholar, the chair of the Princeton University Department of Philosophy, and a renowned professor of semiotics. I was in over my head but I loved it. The company, the show, the dreamy world in which I sat among brilliant folks and discussed the relative merits of a make believe dynasty.

The flight to Charlotte to attend my grandmother's funeral was a long one. I had a feeling that a chapter was ending in our lives, maybe even an entire volume. The grief was heavy, its burden carried by my mother and her siblings, but passed among the grandchildren too. Something foundational was ending. And though she lived a good, long life, it still seemed far too soon.

Add to that a unique personal problem: I'm a terrified flyer. So when the flight suddenly began to climb in the midst of our landing, I felt certain that we were in mortal peril.

Perhaps you think in those moments I, of all people, would turn to prayer,
or comfort my agitated neighbor.

Perhaps I could say a word of peace.

Perhaps.

Here's what I did instead.

I looked my neighbor square in the eyes and said,

"I can't believe I'm going die before I know what happens on *Game of Thrones*."

En route to my grandmother's funeral,
preparing to see my aunts and cousins,
to say goodbye to a home and a community I loved,

and all I can think is how unfair it is that my life might end in the middle of the story. All I can think of is unresolved *endings* ... the stupefying fact that no matter how good we are, how hard we work, how much we acquire ... *endings* are the one thing to which each of us, across time, place, and history, is called.

Disney did not prepare us for this. We may long for neat resolution but the fact is that many of the endings we know belong squarely with the Brothers Grimm.

Moses was called to a life of service,
and then, in the midst of it, still full of vim and vigor, for whatever reason, or no reason at all,
Moses was called to a faithful death.

The text doesn't say that God ended Moses' life.

But the authors goes to great pains to show us the intimacy with which God cared for Moses in death. And *that* is the good news in the middle of this baffling, all too familiar story.

Moses' ending prompts us think differently about what God promises when God calls us to life, to think differently about our place in the story. Moses' ending demands we rethink our narratives — Disney endings and American myths — those saccharine hopes that teach us to anticipate a limitless life and a neatly resolved happily ever after.

Faithful though he was, Moses was never promised that God would give him the land.

Good though he was, he was not promised that God would fulfill his every wish.

Diligent though he was he was never promised that hard work would bring salvation.

He was promised that God would lead,
and that God would be with him — in life and in death.
God promised God's presence. and that — presence — is the controlling narrative that makes
meaning of Moses' life. That is the good news.

Life can be cut short. Death is often unfair. We know those endings. They are not a sign of God's
displeasure or our own folly, they are not a call back to become angels some greater home. They
are simply endings, chaos in the middle. Searing and grief-filled.

But in all of them, through all of them, with the community and the aggrieved,
God is present. That is the promise.

I think about that moment on the airplane all the time,;the horror I felt when the dangling threads
of the show flashed in front of my eyes. In my more generous moments I realize that it may
never have been about *Game of Thrones*. It was grief...grief at the universality of *endings*.

I was afraid when I realized that I had no control over a story that I thought I'd been writing...
afraid that life would simply go on, that I would never know who sat on the throne, would never
find a job I'd love, would never marry, never return to those boisterous Sunday roundtables ...
afraid that I'd miss the funeral and that all my work would come to nothing.

I'd assumed I was in control of my carefully curated life, and that if I was good enough
everything would work out in the end.

I *forgot* that I was following after a story already in progress,
that the chaos of life impedes our best-laid plans,
that we are not promised Disney endings,
and that we, each of us, are limited, and rarely in control.

And if that sounds to dire, too much like the Brothers Grimm, let me be quick to add this: I forgot that the God who claimed me in baptism and called me to a life of discipleship is, from the very beginning, a God who bends chaos into order, creating beauty out of the ashes of our lives. I forgot that I was following, and that God was creating. I forgot that God was with me, and that God, even in endings, was calling me on. That's the promise. It's mine and yours. It's Moses's and Abraham's and my Grandmother's.

God, who is unfolding the story of the Kingdom on earth still has work to do. We are called to our role in that work, to the "Yes" of laboring in the vineyard; we are called to follow along the surprising, beautiful, difficult, circuitous way until our part in the story ends. And when it does end we trust the promise: it ends with God.

Our work may come to its close.

But God labors on.

We should mourn our endings.

Like Moses we can grieve and argue at the fate we inherit.

Like the Israelites we grieve those whose lives are cut short in the middle.

It is a faithful argument. God will bear it.

But it is not the end of the story.

And endings do not erase the work of faith that has come before.

Moses did not enter the land,

but he led the way. And the Israelites finally did.

Empires rose and empires fell.

God stayed faithful while the people strayed.

God commissioned prophets to remind them of the covenant.

And then God became flesh

and proclaimed the goodness of a kingdom bent toward liberation.

God healed and taught and was crucified and dead and buried.

But even that

even that dark tomb, even that cursed tree

was not the end of the story.

God continued the story that began in the garden and moved through a promise and a prophet.
By the power of the Spirit, God is writing that story still. By the power of the Spirit we get to be
a part of that story!

God is still working
and God is still calling.

In all our vulnerabilities
through our joys, scars, hopes, and fears
we are called to take the world into our arms
and then to release it.

God promises to be with us, to keep us in life and death,
and even after death,
to raise us, scars and all, to a new community, a new life everlasting.
God calls us to beginnings, to our part.
And then this side of the story ends. With God, in God, through God.
That is our calling, right smack in the middle.

Thanks be to God.

*—Leigh Stuckey
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