
Nineteenth Sunday in Pentecost

October 23, 2011

Matthew 22: 34-40
Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17
Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Just before getting right into the heart of this text there is a little, mini-sermon aching to be preached.

I did the math: Moses was 120 years old when he died; he led the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years... which means he did not begin his real life's work until he was eighty! So, take heart, those of you who think that life is pretty well over at 29, or 42, or 65, or 79 – you may not yet have even begun to do the real work God has called you to do!

Imagine how history and certainly our faith would be different now if Moses had worked toward Freedom 55!

Let's put this story of the death of Moses in the context of the bigger, Biblical story.

The people of Israel remembered themselves as having been slaves in Egypt for generations. The story of their escape from Egypt, their liberation story, full of signs and miracles, and deeds almost too unbelievable to narrate without a sense of awe and wonder... their wandering through the wilderness for forty years... their reception of the law from Mount Sinai which would from there on in shape their total lives... their numerous failures to be faithful and the numerous times God had remained faithful to them, not always without cost... gradually meandering their way to the Promised Land of milk and honey... all of this has taken place, told in detail in the Biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and then reiterated in a last, long speech by Moses to the people in the book of Deuteronomy as they stand on the verge of the Jordan River with the Land of Promise just on the other side.

Through all of this time Moses has led. He was not the only leader: his brother, Aaron played a major role as did his sister, Miriam, who was called a prophet, and others. But it is Moses who is at the centre. Jewish and Christian tradition calls these books, along with Genesis, the Books of Moses.

So we have this long, history-like, awe-filled story of escape and promise, gift and betrayals, of deaths and a new generation emerging, a people being formed and drawing close to the Promised Land and just about to cross over... and then we pause.

And together we climb up out of the flat plain, up the mountain with Moses... and we look out over the Jordan at the length and breadth of the Promised Land, looking at far more than the human eye can actually see, that place for which we have been longing for forty years...

...and we know, with Moses, that we won't get there. With Moses we know that the Promised Land is, indeed, the land of *promise*, not the land of possession; that it isn't ours, yours and mine, to occupy and dwell in. That goal, that destiny, that future where the land produces abundantly and harvests are always full and the land drips with milk and honey is right there within sight, bigger even than our imaginations, yet we will not cross over.

And then Moses dies and is buried, tradition says, by the very hands of God, or perhaps by God's angels, in the land before the Promised Land, the land of Moab, in the wilderness... with no shrine or grave marker. That is how God wanted it:

... long years of wandering... now, finally, the Promise right over there... but not crossing over... death on this side.

When Jews read through the first five books of the scriptures, as they do annually, they start from the creation stories in Genesis and end up right here: on the mountaintop with Moses, looking over into the Promised Land but not having crossed over... and then they begin again at Genesis.

Yes, they will tell the other stories of Joshua leading the people into the Promised land and of Samuel and David and Solomon and all the rulers, the exile, the prophets, the wisdom writers, the return from exile... all of this...

...but deep in the heart of the tradition, right in that part that shapes communal memory and therefore communal life, is the recognition that our life with God is one of promise and a yet unfulfilled future, that following God we are a people who have journeyed a long, long way but we have not yet arrived, that we are waiting, watching, even gazing at that wonderful fulfillment of God's promises... but it still awaits us. We have not arrived... this "isn't it." That "arrival" day is just ahead, within sight to be sure but not yet achieved. God has begun something with us... and God is not finished yet.

Buddhists have trouble with us because we have trouble being "in the moment"... the "Now." We are always remembering the past and looking to the future. We are always in movement.

We have much to learn from the Buddhists. If our gaze to the future is driven by craving or desire, by anxiety or fear or consumption or the desire to have it all, well, then I get it; that is trouble. In that case, "let go."

But if we know the future as the land promised by God, God's future, not our desires but the destiny that God provides... right there, just across the river... well, that is a powerful force. Because God awaits us just ahead we can be truthful about the past, grounded and safe in the present, and eager for the "new thing" God has in store.

It is a combination wonderfully articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. in his last speech the day before he was assassinated. He is clear throughout the speech about the injustices of racism in past and present – he can tell the truth – and then he invokes this story of Moses on the mountain, and as soon as he does the mainly black crowd cheers and claps because they know this story so well, and they know it is so central to their story. I wish I could make this sound the

marvelous way King says it.... “I’ve been to the mountaintop,” he says, “...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. So I’m happy tonight, I’m not worried about anything; I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

Did you hear what King did there, right at the end? He is a Christian, and a Baptist preacher, and so in one final phrase he reminded us that this is not just one story from scripture that he chose to focus on for that particular speech but that this story is central to our whole story of life in Christ: “mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

The Lord, Jesus Christ, promises the Promised Land; in some ways Christ *is* the Promised Land. Christ has come; Christ lives now; Christ is coming again. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we say those simple lines: when the presider says “let us confess the mystery of faith we say, “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” Past, present, and future. Our lives are caught up in past, present and future, this journey, this movement, this history of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes when we speak as Christians, and some traditions more than others, it sounds like we have got it made, that we have arrived, that we are already in the Promised Land, that “Jesus is the Answer” and therefore there are no more questions; find Jesus and life is good.

But when we are more careful – or more truthful – we know that the life in which we as Christians find ourselves is not all that it one day will be. We haven’t arrived; we have barely begun. God has far more in store for us and for the world than what we have already seen and experienced. We have wandered through the wilderness, the people of God mixing wonders with betrayals, marvels with pettiness, and although we know God with us we also know that the promise still awaits us. The Promised Land is across the river; Jesus is coming again. Our home – our final home – has not yet arrived even though it is even now coming.

We can see it; with the miraculous eyes given to us on the mountaintop we can see it. It gives us courage; it gives us contentment; it gives us strength; it gives us hope. It allows us to say, “I may not get there with you... but I’m happy tonight, I’m not worried about anything, I’m not fearing anything!”

We live in the middle of this amazing, future-producing promise of God, a promise not yet fulfilled but nevertheless life-giving, not unlike the marriage promise which is never fulfilled until “death do us part” but nevertheless gives and shapes life in the here and now.

The promise-giving God, who has been with us, is with us, and calls us into a place of promise, a life flowing with milk and honey.

Sometimes when we are meandering around down here on the plains of flat existence we need to climb up a high mountain to see that promise. Sometimes all it takes is looking at the cross like the one behind me here, or hearing the sounds of Bach or a spiritual, or a tiny taste of bread and wine at this table... or maybe a glance around at the saints and sinners who make up the body of Christ here in this time and place. Look around – the promise of God awaits us.

It is not that there aren't troubles. It is not that there won't be pitfalls and sickness and loss and anxieties ahead.

It is that just ahead, just over that river, just around that corner, God awaits. Whatever comes, God awaits. No matter what the trouble, God awaits. Even if we do not make it into that final, completed promise and we die and get buried right here on the plains of Moab... God awaits.

The promise awaits... and one day soon will be fulfilled.

Moses' last words are not recorded in this text. The last word in this story belongs to God, as it always does.

But if Moses had spoken, he might have said something like this: "I've been to the mountaintop.... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I will not get there with you. But I want you to know today that we will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy today, I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing anything. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!

Amen.