

Living With Life's Incompleteness

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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The LORD said to Moses,... "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob,...I will let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there."

One of the things we want in life is for everything to begin and end clearly. We like clarity; we like closure. We like stories, movies that have a clear ending, preferably a good ending. When I was a kid I hated television shows that would suddenly say, "to be continued." I wanted the resolution then and not have to wait a week.

Perhaps that is one of the attractions of the academic life. The last day of class. The first day of a new semester. The last hour of organic chemistry. The last day you put up with that professor; the last day you put up with that student. A major reason why it's fun to be in school is that, unlike the rest of the world, there is always a day, sometime in May, when it's over. I heard a veteran professor say that a university was a great place because, "Our failures keep graduating."

Things in the "real world" are not so neat. Beginnings and endings are not so clear-cut. There are these histories we can't be rid of, these futures so uncertain.

In the world, there aren't many commencements, no clear closure (which is one of our favorite words), no slip of paper saying, "She's twenty-two now. Your parental responsibility is done. You earned a 3.6 GPA in parenting. At exactly 12:00 midnight your responsibilities end." It doesn't work that way, does it? In the real world, things are considerably more ragged, unfinished, ambiguous.

Which brings us to our scripture lesson for today, one of the most poignant texts in the Old Testament. Here, at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, is the conclusion to the great story of Moses and the Exodus. Second only to the story of Jesus and the Resurrection, is the importance of this story in the Bible. Moses goes up on Mount Nebo, also known as Mount Pisgah, and God shows him the Promised Land in the distance. There is the Jordan River, winding its way before them, and over on the other side is the Land of Promise. This is the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob. This is the land for which the Hebrew slaves in Egypt dreamed. For 120 years, God's hand had been on Moses so that Moses would lead the people to this land. As an infant, God protected Moses from Pharaoh by hiding him in the bulrushes of the Nile. Moses was then raised as a part of the royal household in Egypt but who eventually killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was mistreating the Hebrew slaves. Moses then escaped to the land of Midian to live the quiet life of a shepherd. And out of this quiet life, God called him through the burning bush to become the liberator of God's people in bondage in Egypt. For the next forty years, Moses leads them out of slavery, across the parting Red Sea, through the wilderness, to Mount Sinai where he receives the Ten Commandments, and then for years of wondering in the wilderness.

Until now. Now, finally, Moses and the people are ready to go in. Their old life is ending and their new life is about to begin.

Except Moses does not get to go in. Here, at the threshold, at the door, God does not allow Moses to go over with his people. Moses never gets to the Promised Land. Moses, the great prophet, an extraordinary servant of God. Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, did not get to go over. Instead, the writer says that God allowed him to see it from a distance. And then he died in God's care and God buried him in a place no one knows but God.

Old Moses – as great as he was – perhaps are more like him than we realize.

There is much unfulfillment in this life, a great deal of life spent on the verge, at the door but not over the threshold, tethered to yesterday, unable to possess tomorrow. Part of our challenge is that, we must, like Moses, come to terms with the incompleteness of life. So much of the business of life is unfinished.

Why was Moses denied entrance into the Promised Land? He led Israel out of Egyptian slavery, through the wilderness. Moses taught Israel the commands of God, interceded when Israel broke those commandments. Moses is therefore rightly called, "servant of God" (Deut. 34:5). If anyone should be going into the Promised Land, it ought to be Moses. The Deuteronomist suggests that Moses violated God's law, but nothing really explains the tragedy of this last scene of Moses' life. The ancient writer says that it was because God was angry with him because of the sins of the people. Maybe. The book of Numbers says that it was because Moses

disobeyed God when he struck the rock to bring forth water back in the desert instead of speaking to it. Perhaps.

Here, at the end, the ancient writer reports, but does not explain why Moses was denied entrance to the land, why his life ended within sight, but not having realized his life's goal. I think that the writer does not explain because he doesn't know. The explanations earlier in Deuteronomy and in Numbers are almost like after-thoughts, added later in order to make some sense about something that makes no sense to us. Moses lived 120 years and even, having lived almost two of our lifetimes, his life was unfinished. We are told only that the Lord buried Moses in a hidden grave.

How fitting of Martin Luther King to evoke this story in his last sermon. "I've been to the mountain. I've seen the Promised Land. Even if I don't get there with you. I've been to the mountaintop." King died outside the Promised Land of racial justice. He could see that promised land, but he never got there himself.

We want stories with happy endings. Boy gets girl. Girl gets boy. They live happily ever after. And nowadays, we tend to want them to live happily ever after in the time of a 30 minute sit-com.

Christopher Lasch's book, The True and Only Heaven, says that the "grand narrative" of our nation, the great "story line" of our society is faith in progress. Progress, as the grand story of ourselves, tells us that we have a definite past with which we can be done and finished, and promises an achievable future which we

can control.

Years ago, I heard a law professor speaking on the difference between his law and our justice. "We are asking too much of our legal system," he said. "Our courts can give you vengeance, or some punishment, or some compensation but we can't give you complete, final justice, not in this world. Real justice is beyond our courts, it is not in this world."

Sister Prejean, the real-life nun in "Dead Man Walking," said that one of the reasons why she is opposed to capital punishment of murderers is that it doesn't work. Families don't feel better after the murderer of their loved one is executed. They want to see him executed again, then again. Nothing, not even execution, ends their pain, concludes the nightmare.

We love clean endings. Satisfying last scenes. Conclusiveness. Closure.

But this is the Bible, this is life, not the movies. Things are messier in the Bible, messier in life.

Many of us are parents. And we know that one of the most important parental virtues is patience. Sometimes we parents would die for things to go ahead and work out in our children's lives.

At the same time, there are many young adults today who may not want to go to the Promised Land if it's the land promised to their parents.

Several years ago, Susan Litwin wrote The Postponed Generation. Young adults today, says Litwin, are not growing up; they are postponing adulthood into their late twenties and even early thirties. They graduate from prestigious colleges, not marching into the future, but meandering through unending adolescence, unable to make commitments, or to leave home; afraid to put their money down on a future. Litwin names this national phenomenon of young adults -- postponement.

One of the reasons says Litwin, is that this generation is suspicious of commitment and risk. She says that their lives have been predictable, that so many things have worked out well for them, that we have unintentionally deluded them into thinking that it is possible to plan and organize life in such a way that all things will work out well.

There were no major world wars during their lifetime, no Great Depression. Their lives have been planned, programmed. Goals have been set and realized. Why shouldn't all life be like that? So this generation of young adults postpones marriage longer than any previous generation, waiting for the perfect job, the absolutely right person, the two high performance cars, 2.3 children.

Alas, this is not life. Ask Moses. Life is an accumulation of decisions that could have been made differently, baggage called regret, faces you will not see again, words that came out wrong, things that don't work out as planned. Most of us don't spend much time thinking about it, and that's good, for accumulated regret, obsessive second guessing leads to moral paralysis. People at forty "close doors

more slowly," says the poet.

I tend to agree with Litwin, but I do wonder if there are some things that might explain some of this. I wonder that this generation is not so much paralyzed with caution but rather is acutely aware of limits. Ecological, political, economic limits. Compared to their parents' (our) Age of Aquarius optimism, their awareness of limits may be one of the younger generation's great virtues.

Here is the challenge: How to live with life's limits without paralysis?

"In high school, I thought I could do anything I wanted to do," he said. "But after six years of working, I've wised up."

Knowing that we live few stories with completely satisfying conclusions and utterly happy endings can be a step toward wisdom. So the word to you today from this ending of Moses' life and the Book of Deuteronomy is to go ahead and live. Embrace the ambiguity. God's purposes for the world are not utterly dependent on your getting it right. You can go ahead and live, not knowing how it will all turn out, not having to make it all turn out. As Rabbi Talfon taught (Mishnah, Sanhedrin, 2:21), "You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it."

The most frequent thing I hear from couples wanting to get married is, "I have finally found the right person."

Hear me on this. If getting married is a matter of finding the “right person,” marriage is doomed. Say you find the “right person” at twenty-five. So what? At twenty-six you will find that you are living with a very different person. That person has changed; of course, so have you. If marriage is about living with the right person, then what do you do?

Which is the reason why the church never asks people getting married if they are certain this is the right person. All we ask is your willingness to risk with this person, even in the moments when this person is not right, for better for worse, richer or poorer. The willingness to risk commitment, through life's successes and regrets, through an uncertain future, is what the church asks. Then the rightness of the person and the love, comes.

So you can go ahead, venture even if you don't arrive where you planned. Moses could tell us: Sometimes, the trip itself is more interesting than its destination. Go ahead, bet your life on someone, even with second thoughts, have children, even when the ones you get aren't the ones you thought you wanted. Moses could tell us, only God knows where it all leads, what it finally means. We are the story God writes. God only knows. Who we are called to be and do and where we will end up is ultimately up to God. We therefore live in the conviction that God really does put us to good purposes, even though we may not see clearly, even though we may not enter the promised land of concrete results and visible fulfillment in our exodus from here to there.

So this final word about Moses. Moses walked for 120 years with God. We

know that from Moses' birth to his death that he knew God. As the writer says, Moses knew God face to face. God called Moses through the burning bush on a mountain top. And God spoke to Moses while delivering the Ten Commandments on a mountain top. And Moses life ends on a mountain top talking with his old friend, God. I wonder, if somewhere along this long journey of Moses, if his walking with God became more important than getting to go into the Promised Land?

Sometimes, in God's presence and by God's grace, the means of our lives can become the grace-filled ends of our lives. Even though the past hangs over us and even though the future is uncertain, we can be thankful that God is walking with us and that we are walking with God. And that becomes the most important thing.

Amen and Amen.