

# October 29, 2017 "A Future Built but Unseen"

(Reformation Sunday; 500th Year)

## **Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

Are we willing to be a part of something we'll never see?

That's part of the legacy the Reformation leaves us. That Moses and so many others leave us. That Christ himself leaves us. We are helping build a kingdom, a church, that is imbued with our hopes but will ultimately be unfamiliar to us.

There will certainly be the telltale signs: love for God (with all that defines us) and love for neighbor, the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking and sins forgiven. But the church that will be couldn't possibly be the church we know because we won't live there. The generations to follow will be. And what seeds we plant, what investment we invite our children to make isn't even for them. It's for the generations that follow them.

So when Moses is taken to the Promised Land, it is bittersweet. His disobedience prevents him from entering. But his faithfulness allows him a glimpse of what might be. What has our own disobedience prevented? What will our faithfulness allow us to glimpse?



## Deuteronomy 34:1-12

**1** Then Moses hiked up from the Moabite plains to Mount Nebo, the peak of the Pisgah slope, which faces Jericho. The Lord showed him the whole land: the Gilead region as far as Dan's territory; **2** all the parts belonging to Naphtali along with the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as the entirety of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea; **3** also the arid southern plain, and the plain—including the Jericho Valley, Palm City—as far as Zoar.

**4** Then the Lord said to Moses: "This is the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I promised: 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have shown it to you with your own eyes; however, you will not cross over into it."

**5** Then Moses, the Lord's servant, died—right there in the land of Moab, according to the Lord's command. **6** The Lord buried him in a valley in Moabite country across from Beth-peor. Even now, no one knows where Moses' grave is.

**7** Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eyesight wasn't

impaired, and his vigor hadn't diminished a bit.

**8** Back down in the Moabite plains, the Israelites mourned Moses' death for thirty days. At that point, the time for weeping and for mourning Moses was over.

**9** Joshua, Nun's son, was filled with wisdom because Moses had placed his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to Joshua, and they did exactly what the Lord commanded Moses.

**10** No prophet like Moses has yet emerged in Israel; Moses knew the Lord face-to-face!

**11** That's not even to mention all those signs and wonders that the Lord sent Moses to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh, to all his servants, and to his entire land—**12** as well as all the extraordinary power that Moses displayed before Israel's own eyes!



- The incident that is preventing Moses from entering can be found in Numbers 20:1-13. The people needed water again. God told Moses to speak to the rock. Moses struck it instead (in anger at the people). God said, "Because you didn't trust me to show my holiness before the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them."
- Whatever we might surmise about the fairness of Moses' sentence, he is nevertheless revered in Jewish circles to this day for the reasons described here.
- What sets you apart from other prophets?
- Knowing that he would not enter the Land with them, what do you think kept Moses going to the very end?



## Commentary on the passage by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker

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Time flies.

Last Sunday, we were privy to a conversation between Moses and God at the beginning of the wilderness wanderings. Today, we come to the end of that story, the story of Moses and the Exodus. We come also to the end of the book of Deuteronomy and the end of the portion of the Bible known as the Torah or the Pentateuch [common name of the first five books of the Bible].

And at this important juncture of the biblical narrative, the story that occupies our attention is that of the death of Moses. His life has spanned the last four biblical books: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He has figured prominently in almost every story contained therein. He has led the Israelites for 40 years, out of slavery in Egypt, to Mt. Sinai, through many trials, and now they stand at the cusp of the Promised Land, about to

enter into the promise God made so many generations ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (verse 4).

But Moses is not permitted to enter the land.

The injustice of the situation has troubled commentators for centuries. Earlier, in Deuteronomy 32:48-52, God says that Moses is not allowed to enter the land because he failed to show God's holiness before the people at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1-13). It is hard to discern in that story, however, what exactly Moses does wrong.

Most commentators who try to solve the puzzle note that he strikes the rock twice instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded. And he says, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" perhaps thereby claiming to be the source of the miracle, rather than giving credit to God (Numbers 20:10).

Such infractions seem insignificant, however, in the face of all that Moses has done right. He has performed "signs

and wonders" (verse 11) in the land of Egypt, leading his people out of slavery into freedom. He has led the people faithfully throughout their wilderness wandering. He has, on more than one occasion, interceded for them with God,



averting God's righteous anger. Of all the Israelites, surely Moses, "the servant of the LORD" (verse 5) deserves most of all to enter into the land. But he cannot.

Patrick Miller suggests that in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is understood as a sort of suffering servant: "[T]he judgment on Moses is for their sin (1:34-37). Moses does not share their fearful perspective, but he shares their existence and so must suffer with them."<sup>1</sup> In the passage Miller cites, God is angry with the Israelites for

their lack of trust, and Moses is included in the punishment: "Even with me the LORD was angry on your account, saying, 'You also shall not enter there'" (Deuteronomy 1:37). No mention is made here of the story in Numbers. Instead, Moses as the leader of the people is punished for the sin of the people.<sup>2</sup>

It is ambiguous, then, why Moses is not permitted entry into the Promised Land. Is it because of the incident at Meribah? Is it because of the people's sin? Arguments can be made on both sides. In the passage for today, no reason at all is given. It is simply stated that Moses will not enter the land. The pathos of that situation is left to stand alone. But there are other things to note about the passage.

Though Moses is not permitted to enter the land, he is given an extraordinary vision of it. Starting in the north, and sweeping west and south, Moses sees the land that God is giving the Israelites. Standing on the border of that land, Moses sees the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God made so long ago to the

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**"Though several are designated as "the servant of the LORD" (Abraham, Jacob, Joshua, David, the prophets, and especially the servant in the servant songs of Isaiah), no one receives this tribute as frequently as Moses."**

—Rev. Dr. Diane Jacobson



patriarchs. As a later writer said of the patriarchs, Moses "died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [he] saw and greeted them" (Hebrews 11:13).

Moses is in a now-and-not-yet time. He stands on the border of the Promised Land, but will not enter there. Whatever the reasons for Moses' situation, perhaps it speaks more directly

to people's experiences than had he been permitted to enter the land. I daresay that most of the people who hear this story this Sunday will know something of disappointment and dreams unfulfilled. Many people will recognize the feeling of being in a now-and-not-yet time, trusting in promises that have not yet been fully realized, but living by faith nonetheless.



This story has spoken to people of faith, Jews and Christians, through the centuries. Jewish congregations traditionally read through the Torah (the Pentateuch) every year, ending with this story and beginning immediately again with Genesis 1. That experience of being always (liturgically) outside the Promised Land is one that has helped form the identity of that community of faith through centuries of being -- quite

literally -- outside the Promised Land. For Christians through the centuries, on the other hand, this story has spoken of the now-and-not-yet time between Christ's first and second coming. For both communities, this story has encouraged faith.

One of the most striking uses of this text, of course, is in the speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated. He addressed the crowd in Memphis:

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.<sup>3</sup>

That great modern-day prophet used the story of Israel's first great prophet to speak of hope and faith to a people who needed both. That story can continue to speak to people today who, even in the midst of disappointment, live by faith in the God of Moses, the God who does indeed fulfill promises.

Notes:

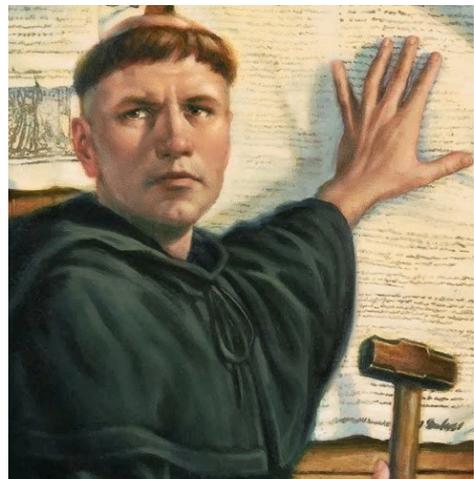
<sup>1</sup>Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 43.

<sup>2</sup>For similar passages that speak of Moses suffering for the sake of the people, see Deut 3:23-27 and 4:21-22.

<sup>3</sup>*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 286.

## Additional Thoughts

- We won't be present for the church in which our grandchildren raise their children. How can we possibly know what that church will need from us?
- Traditionally, Moses is said to have authored the Pentateuch. But that really can't be (at least for Deuteronomy) given this chapter.
- The Reformation was, at its most basic, an attempt by the reformers to refashion the Roman Catholic Church. Their goal (at least, initially) was not to break off and form other denominations. Do you think they'd take responsibility for the varied state of the Church today? Could they have foreseen it?



- The people wandered the desert with Moses for 40 years before being ready to enter the Promised Land. What is it that God was changing in the people in order to get them ready to enter? (on whom or what were they relying?)
- As you think about the future of our church, what do you think should change (if anything) in order to be ready for that future? How can you be a part of that?
- The Printing Press was arguably the most important invention driving and making possible the Reformation. What technological advance do you imagine would be central to the next Reformation?

