

Sermon October 26, 2014 "God's Rhythms" Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Matthew 22:34-46

Today's reading from Deuteronomy today always leaves me feeling a bit uncomfortable. Moses didn't get to enter the promised land, but was only permitted to see it from the mountaintop. For some reason God let him die *before* the Hebrew people entered the promised land. At one place in the Bible we are told that God didn't let Moses go into the new land because of the faithlessness of the people. In another place it says that Moses disobeyed God when Moses struck the rock for water at Meribah, and thus caused this limitation. And we know that Moses was buried somewhere in Moab, a place no serious Jew would choose to claim as a last resting place.

Moses went through so much with the people, it seems a shame that he couldn't at least have been granted a burial in the promised land. But this was not to be. God had other ideas, just like so often happens in our lives.

The "perfect timings" we would like to have don't always come. Years ago retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon wrote that one of his comforts when he was a professor teaching at Duke University was the way in academia everything begins and ends with predictability. There's a last day of class and a first day of the new semester. There are dates for tests and due dates for papers. There is a day for graduation. Each year, there's a day in May when things are over, at least for a time. As a young professor, Willimon remembered being told by a seasoned colleague: "The university is a great place to be, because our failures keep graduating." (from *Word & Witness*, 1993)

Our daily lives are filled with things unfinished, unresolved, and more and more complicated. Perhaps that's why we are told about Moses not being allowed to enter the promised land. For it gives us perspective: The rhythm of God's work was not the same as the rhythm of Moses' life and it is not the same as what we want. As much as Moses did to help get those challenging people to the land God was trying to give them, God's purposes did not depend entirely on Moses. The people discovered that God was with them even without Moses, even as they moved into the strange new land. And even though Moses died before entering the land, his name continued to be honored and still is today, among Jews and Christians.

What does this say to us? God's purposes may have a rhythm quite different from what we expect and hope and want, but God's work does go on. What we *see* is not the entire picture. God always has a larger picture.

In her autobiography, *My Life*, the late Golda Meir, years ago Prime Minister of Israel, wrote about being a teenager in Milwaukee in the early 1900's and observing debates about the future shape of Judaism. One group, led by Chaim Zhitlovsky, advocated the use of Yiddish, the language of the Eastern European ghetto, as the Jewish national language. His answer to Jewish persecution was the enactment of various civil rights laws to protect Jews wherever they lived. On the other side was fiery Zionist Nachman Syrkin. He advocated the revival of Hebrew as the national language of Jews, and the establishment of the modern state of Israel. In a debate, Syrkin said to Zhitlovsky: "All right, let's come to an agreement to divide it all up. You take everything that already exists, and I'll take everything that doesn't exist yet. For example: Eretz Yisroel (the land of Israel) as a Jewish state does not exist, so it's mine; the Diaspora does exist, so it's yours. Yiddish exists, so it is yours; but since Hebrew isn't spoken yet in everyday life, it will be mine. Whatever is real and concrete will be yours, and whatever you call empty dreams will be mine."

Well, we know who got the better deal in that! Israel reclaimed its land and became a nation, and Hebrew became its language. The dream of what was not in existence in the early 1900's became a reality!

Think about it. Would WE have the faith to lay claim to things others might call "empty dreams" today? Most of us were taught the value of the "bird in hand." It's easier to cling to things of concrete and brick, things we can see and touch. To be able to declare, "You take what IS, and I will take what is to be" requires huge faith!

As I write these words, our own situation as a congregation here in Winsted comes to mind, and I wonder where, how, and whether, for us, this talk of dreams and bricks speaks to our situation? Has God finished God's work in our church, in our lives, in this world, or does God have more to do? Are we to cling to and try to wring comfort from what we see and touch, or are we to go up on whatever mountaintops we can meet God and squint into an uncertain future with God, trusting God's unique and purpose-filled timing? I don't know what God's doing, but I know it's gonna be good!

Moses didn't get to put his foot in the land he'd struggled to attain, but even so, God's purposes were carried out. The promise, given so many years earlier, was a good one.

In the Gospel lesson, the lawyer came up to Jesus and tried to test him: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" In Matthew's account, Jesus answered him directly: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then he told him the second one: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Everything hangs on these two commandments."

Both lessons for today have a message for us. Most of us here face big challenges: many are older, some are unemployed and needing jobs, several have health challenges. Some of you are looking for new places to live. In terms of membership and finances, our congregation has an uncertain future. We may stand on our "hills" and wonder what lies ahead, whether God is showing us anything, and how much more we'll be able to do.

Moses would probably tell us that we can trust God. God's work will go on, and God's love will prevail even when what we want doesn't seem finished or possible. And Jesus would certainly tell us to stop worrying so much about whether we will survive, or how many members we do or don't have, or what we will do tomorrow; and to start asking the question: Am I loving God with all that I am and have? Are we loving our neighbors as much as we do ourselves? **If we're loving God and loving our neighbors, then nothing else really matters.**

Way back in the sixth century, a Christian monk by the name of Dorotheos of Gaza offered this metaphor of the Christian life:

"Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference...Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings... Let us assume for the sake of the analogy that in order to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another, and the closer they are to one another, the closer they are to God." (from Dorotheos of Gaza: *Discourses and Sayings*; quoted by R. C. Bondi, *To Love As God*)

*Loves: Conversations with the Early Church)*

In our lives, in our journeys with God, we may definite ideas as to what would be the "promised land" of life. I'd like to see 100 people here in church each Sunday, and to have no illness in any family of our church, and to see our congregation have enough money for our bills and be able to give away thousands of dollars to help with the needs of the world each year. I'd like for us to have a Sunday school, and a real sense of excitement in our worship... But God may have something else in mind for us, some other kind of challenge in which we must be faithful. Sometimes blessings sneak in in ways we'd never be able to plan or pre-define.

Years ago, writer-physician Richard Selzer told about how it was his custom to spend his Wednesday afternoons - his sabbaths - in a big city public library reading room. There were some "regulars" who spent their time in that room, going through periodicals and newspapers, mostly elderly. Selzer had given names to these men and women according to some article of clothing they wore repeatedly, i.e., Mrs. Fringes, Galoshes, Old Stovepipe, Neckerchief.

One Wednesday Selzer noticed that Neckerchief was hobbling and wincing in pain with each step to the magazine rack. Months before, Selzer had learned that Neckerchief was a childless widower who lived on his Social Security check in a nearby rooming house. In a whisper, Selzer asked the old man what was wrong.

"The toenails are too long. I can't get at 'em. I'm walking on 'em."

Selzer left the library, returned to his office, and got his heavy duty toenail clippers, the kind that look like pliers. He returned to the library and told Neckerchief to meet him in the Men's Room where he would cut his toenails. It took almost an hour for the surgeon to do each big toe, the nails were so long and thick and curved and bloody. After he was finished, he washed and dried each toe, using toilet paper.

After Neckerchief's shoes and socks were back on, Selzer asked him how his feet felt. "It don't hurt," Neckerchief said. And then, Selzer reports, "He gave me a smile that I shall keep in my safety-deposit box at the bank until the day I die." (from *Letters to a Young Doctor*, Richard Selzer) ...You just never know how blessing will sneak into your life if you are willing to love others. (pause)

What lies ahead? We don't know, for any of us. But we may rest and take hope in the promise that, no matter what God's rhythm or timing, God's purposes are still being worked out, in our lives and in this world. ... My husband has a saying, whenever somebody gets upset over something that can't be changed: "Don't get your drawers in a wad over it." I guess this applies to each of us in our lives: "Don't get your drawers in a wad," but make sure that you are doing two things: Loving God with whatever your life is; and loving others, to the best of your ability. Doing these two things is a guarantee that you're heading right into the Center of true Life. And that God's purposes are being worked out. Thank God! Amen.