

October 29, 2023

The Rev Beth Orling

Pentecost 22A. Pr. 25. October 29, 2023. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

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

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, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The 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.” Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He 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, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

### **The Gospel**

#### **Matthew 22:34-46**

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

## The Sermon

In the first lesson we heard today, Moses is ready to die. He has been a beloved, powerful and yet flawed leader. He has sown seeds of hope and faithfulness in the people of Israel. He has modeled leadership to Joshua and those who would follow. And he will die before he sees the fruits of his labor. He goes up to the mountaintop where he can see across the river, but he will not cross over the river into the Promised Land.

Yet Joshua and the others will.

Perhaps you have moved into a house where the prior owner planted vegetables before she moved and now you are harvesting them. Perhaps you remember the saying, “Nothing you do for a child is ever wasted,” and you wonder what the next and the next generation will turn out to be.

On April 3, 1968, in Memphis, the night before he died, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood, exhausted, in front of a church full of people and declared in a trembling voice, “Because I’ve been to the mountaintop....” Those who had spoken before him had recounted Dr. King’s mighty works, like the writer of Deuteronomy

recounted the mighty works of Moses. Dr. King went on, “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 the mountain,...And I’ve looked over. And I have s-e-e-e-e-n, the promised land.” He stared out over the microphones with brimming eyes and the trace of a smile. “And I may not get there with you,” he shouted, “but I want you to know, tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land!”

People wept that night and wept again the next day when Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered.

+ + +

The news that came out of Lewiston, Maine, this week disturbed and broke our hearts once again. Another mass shooting using an AR-15 destroyed lives and cut to the heart of our nation. Senseless killing seems to be rooted in our human brokenness. The news from Israel and Gaza and Ukraine continues to haunt and cause us -- along with millions of others -- to grieve.

I wanted to talk this morning about how Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Cranmer, the original Martin Luther, and you and I often start projects and programs and movements and may not expect to see the end of all our efforts.

Gun violence and war have interfered, and we try to come to grips with the thought that so many noble and well-intentioned people with ideas of how to make the world a better place have not lived to see their hopes come to fulfillment.

People have worked for decades on family businesses, with church congregations, or with extensive projects in art or architecture or commerce, only to see that no one will continue the family business, the church will be closed, the projects will fail and never be completed.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who compiled the Book of Common Prayer, which we still use today, sought to make many reforms in the English church. Yet, he was imprisoned and burned at the stake as a heretic in 1556.

Martin Luther, the monk credited or blamed for initiating the Reformation of the Roman church in Europe in the 1500s, is remembered in some places today. The anniversary of his first attempt at reform occurs October 31, now 506 years ago. Because Oct. 31 was the night before All Saints’ Day, when many people would

attend church or at least visit the church graveyard with treats, Dr. Luther chose that day to post his hopes for reform on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany – hoping many would read his ideas. He never wanted to start a new church; he begged people not to attach his name to any church. He just wanted the Roman church to stop selling certificates of forgiveness because he had come to believe and know that God’s grace was FREE, not possible to buy or sell or earn.

Both Moses and Martin Luther died natural deaths, but neither they nor Martin Luther King, Jr. nor Thomas Cranmer lived to see what became of the mighty work they began.

You and I may never see or know what good may come from our efforts on behalf of people we love, people we serve on Mondays, people we befriend along the pathways of our lives.

There is but one who fully completed his work on this earth. We often put the symbol of Alpha and Omega on our church art, for example on the green frontal hanging at our Eucharistic table, or the letters on my stole, or the little diagram with the candle on your bulletin insert this morning. The kids who came to the Communion class learned that Alpha is the first and Omega the last letter of the Greek alphabet, the language in which the Gospels and letters of the Christian scriptures was written.

And so we proclaim, **Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega**, the beginning and the end, the author and finisher of our faith. His death was not the end of his work. He came to live always and forever in and with us.

Moses’ work continued, Martin Luther’s work continued, perhaps not as either of them had envisioned it; they might well weep today to see the state of the middle east and the proliferation of denominations within the Christian Church. Martin Luther King’s work continues in the heart of everyone who seeks to fight the racism that infects our society. People across the world pray from the Book of Common Prayer.

You and I may become discouraged when we see things we hoped to accomplish remaining unfinished, or when we see young lives cut off way too early. But perhaps the message of today’s readings and sermon is the message of Jesus’ words to the lawyers in today’s Gospel. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Life in this world is far more complicated than we may acknowledge. Who can unravel the myriad motives of war, racism, gun violence. But we can endeavor, with the help of God's holying Spirit, to live as well as we can with Jesus' words as our guide. We have not always lived in love; for that we repent and ask forgiveness. We have not always forgiven ourselves; for that we also ask forgiveness and pray for those we may have harmed along the way. But we have glimpsed the promised land in the faith of Jesus, in the lives of people who have followed him, in the lives of people you are sitting next to this morning. And that promised land of love and truth and hope stands before us.

Legacies of the great people we have talked about this morning include "The Book of Common Prayer" – full of psalms and prayers which are sung or spoken daily around the world. The first verse of today's psalm, "Lord, you have been our refuge" is reflected in Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." Our alternate hymnal, LEV – Lift Every Voice is named for the James Weldon Johnson poem which became the anthem of civil rights advocates, "Lift Every Voice and Sing till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty."

We hang our faith, our hopes, our love on the Alpha and Omega, Jesus Christ, with the Creator and the Holy Spirit, today, tomorrow and always – **and we sing on.**  
Amen.