

October 25, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Responsive Psalm 90, a prayer of Moses

One: Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.

All: Before the mountains were born or you
brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

One: You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

All: A thousand years in your sight are like a day
that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

One: How much longer will your anger last?
Have pity, O Lord, on your servants!

All: Fill us each morning with your constant love,
so that we may sing and be glad all our life.

One: Give us now as much happiness as the sadness
you gave us during all our years of misery.

All: Let us, your servants, see your mighty deeds;
let our descendants see your glorious might.

One: Lord our God, may your blessings be with us.

All: Give us success in all we do!

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Mount Pisgah east of Jericho, and there the Lord showed him the whole land: the territory of Gilead as far north as the town of Dan; ² the entire territory of Naphtali; the territories of Ephraim and Manasseh; the territory of Judah as far west as the Mediterranean Sea; ³ the southern part of Judah; and the plain that reaches from Zoar to Jericho, the city of palm trees. ⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "This is the land that I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob I would give to their descendants. I have let you see it, but I will not let you go there."

⁵ So Moses, the Lord's servant, died there in the land of Moab, as the Lord had said he would. ⁶ The Lord buried him in a valley in Moab, opposite the town of Bethpeor, but to this day no one knows the exact place of his burial. ⁷ Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; he was as strong as ever, and his eyesight was still good. ⁸ The people of Israel mourned for him for thirty days in the plains of Moab.

⁹ Joshua son of Nun was filled with wisdom, because Moses had appointed him to be his successor. The people of Israel obeyed Joshua and kept the commands that the Lord had given them through Moses.

¹⁰ There has never been a prophet in Israel like Moses; the Lord spoke with him face-to-face. ¹¹ No other prophet has ever done miracles and wonders like those that the Lord sent Moses to perform against the king of Egypt, his officials, and the entire country. ¹² No other prophet has been able to do the great and terrifying things that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Message: Endings and Beginnings

Our two Scripture readings this morning are both about Moses, reflecting on his life as a leader of God's people.

Moses was, of course, one of the great prophets and leaders recorded in the Old Testament.

An Israelite born into slavery in Egypt
and then scooped up from the Nile River, basket and all,
by an Egyptian princess,
forced to run as a young man
after killing an Egyptian who was abusing Israelites
and then finding himself confronted
by a bush on fire that did not burn...
Moses had an exciting life
before becoming a prophet
and liberator of Israel!

And after a long life, we reach at last the moment of Moses' death.
It's a poignant moment.
We normally think that it is better to die
in the company of our loved ones,
our family, our partner or spouse, our friends.
To be surrounded by those we love and who love us,
at home, perhaps, or somewhere safely cared for, in a peaceful setting.
Not climbing a mountain, all on our own,
wandered off into the wilderness to die alone.
But Moses is indeed alone, in the wilds,
on top of a mountain...
...alone, that is, except for God.
Perhaps it is fitting after all, that Moses
– who spoke so many times with God,
spent so much one-on-one time with God in the wilderness,
and even on top of mountains –
maybe it's right that he should come
to the end of his days on Mount Nebo,
talking to God one last time.

As Moses stood on Mount Nebo,
he could have looked backward or forward.
It is a very human tendency to come to the end of something
– whether it's a job or a relationship or even a life –
we come to the end, and we pause,
and we remember.

So let's embrace that human desire to look back at the end of Moses' life,
and remember Egypt, and the Exodus,
and the wilderness that led
to this mountain view of the Promised Land.

When God first brought Israel out of Egypt,
the Promised Land lay straight ahead
about a hundred miles to the north and east
along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.
Not too far, really.
Doable, probably
in about a month or so of daily walking,
even for a large group.

But instead, God led them to make a sharp right turn and head south,
sending them on the desert road
that ran along the western edge of the Sinai Peninsula
to the Red Sea
and the wilderness beyond.
And we know it took them years
to find their way out again.
Why did God lead them on the hard route?
Why does God lead us in such difficult ways?
We often come up with different explanations
for the hardships we experience;
a lesson to be learned, perhaps,
or some test of trust and obedience.
But here, God explained that hard right turn into the desert.
Ahead of the Israelites, by the more direct route,
lay a warlike group of people called Philistines.
And God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds
and return to Egypt."
This is a specific example of a general truth:
that God's mysterious leading
always has a very good and loving reason,
even if we don't have any idea at the time of what it is.
But looking back, Moses would know.

Just down the road from the that mysterious turn into the desert,
Moses and Israel were trapped
between the shores of the Red Sea and the army of Egypt.
God knew his people well,
because they immediately began to cry,
"It would have been better for us to serve the

Egyptians than to die in the desert.”
 What’s the point of being saved
 if it leads to trouble like this?
 We might not find ourselves trapped between an army and the sea,
 but I suspect we each have those memories
 of when we’ve followed God into something,
 full of trust and hope and praying hard...
 ...and found only trouble and grief.

Moses cried out to the Lord and God answered.
 “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see
 the deliverance the Lord will bring you today....”
 The sea parted and Israel passed through on dry ground,
 their enemies washed away.
 Deliverance may not look the way we expect;
 but looking back, like Moses,
 perhaps we too can see where God has rescued us
 from impossible dead-ends and difficult situations.

On the other side of Red Sea was the terrible wilderness of Sinai;
 barren, desolate, without food or water.
 No possible way for God’s people to stay alive on their journey
 to the Promised Land.

Once again, through a haze of hunger and thirst and fear,
 God’s people remembered their slavery fondly;
 at least then they weren’t in danger of starving.
 But in the wilderness, they had a God who could provide
 in miraculous ways:
 turning bitter water sweet,
 raining bread from heaven and blowing quails all over the camp,
 and even providing water from a rock.
 We might not see that kind of miracle if we look back on our lives;
 but what miracles – what unexpected gifts – have we received from God?
 Supplies, whether spiritual or material,
 for own journeys through the wilderness?

As Moses sat on Mount Nebo,
 if he did indulge in the very human need to look back at the end,
 he would’ve seen a faithful and active God,
 with him, with Israel,
 every step of the way.

But Moses would also have seen the fear and failings of God’s people, too.

If you know your Bible stories, then you know that after leaving Egypt,
Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness
before we see Moses at the top of Mount Nebo,
handing over leadership to Joshua
to take Israel into the Promised Land.

Forty years for a 100-mile journey.
Except that two years into that journey,
the nation of Israel stood at the border of the Promised Land...
...and turned, and walked back into the desert.

Twelve spies were sent into the Land to see what was there.
Two said that it was good and ready for them to take over,
while ten said it was filled with unconquerable enemies.

Despite all the mighty things God had already done for them,
Israel let their fear kill their faith and they wanted, once more,
to return to slavery in Egypt.

God forgave them,
but Israel experienced the consequences
of their choice.

They wandered for the next 38 years
until all of those fearful people had died in the wilderness,
and a new generation grew up.
Life becomes confusing and desperate
and so much harder
when we refuse to move ahead,
to try something new,
to begin,
because we don't trust God.

So here Moses sits, atop Mount Nebo,
at the end and at the beginning.

Through dangerous situations and awe-filled moments,
through fear and faith, through frustration and hope,
through sin and victory;
from a reed-basket in the River Nile
to this mountain-top with an incredible view...
...through all the changes and challenges
of his action-packed adventure story of a life,
the one constant, unchanging,
steadfast and utterly reliable thing

Moses always had
was God.
And although we've indulged in some very human reminiscing
on Moses' behalf...
...here, at the end of his life,
God tells Moses to look ahead to the future,
to the new beginning
God's people were about to have
in the Promised Land.

Although Moses was not to enter into the Land himself,
he did receive this hopeful gift from God
of seeing a new beginning in his own ending.
His life's work would be finished by his protégé, Joshua.
The people God had called him to lead for forty years,
especially this new generation of God's people
who knew little else but desert wandering
and absolute trust in God,
they would go to the Promised Land
and make it their home.

So what does this all mean for us?
What is there for us to take hold of
in the epic story of God and Moses and Israel?

Well, quite a lot, really.
Whatever you're experiencing,
whether you are guided more by fear or faith,
if you can look back and see God
or if it's a struggle to spot him
through a haze of trouble and grief,
if your journey is just beginning
or has come to a middle
or is nearing its end...
...there is wisdom and hope
in the story
of God and Moses.

But right now there are at least two things
we are all experiencing together on our journeys:
a murky, hard-to-see future
and the uneven ground of our present circumstances.

We do have that human tendency to want to look back,
 because we believe that we can
 remember and see more clearly
 into our past than into the future.
 Even, sometimes, we long to return to the past;
 to have things the way they used to be,
 to get back to normal,
 to live our lives as we once did.
 And yet, God encourages us always to look ahead,
 and to hope.
 God's saving plan was and is much greater
 even than the Promised Land Moses could see from his mountain-top,
 as beautiful and hopeful as that green and lush land was,
 a refuge and a home for his weary, desert-worn people.
 And in his Son and our Saviour Jesus,
 God showed us more clearly than ever that there is hope,
 and that he is still acting for our good:
 leading, guiding, saving, and providing...
 ...even when we cannot see him doing it.

But...there is an incident, earlier in Moses' life, atop another mountain,
 after Israel had failed epically and Moses has been talking to God.
 He asks to see God, to see his face and his glory.
 God said it would be too much for Moses, that it'd kill him.
 But, said God, I will hide you in the cleft of a rock
 and cover you with my hand.
 And I will pass by you,
 and you will see my back.

God is always there.
 There are so many things right now
 that are in flux
 or that seem broken and unfixable.
 Whatever part of the world, of society, of your life
 – whether it's climate change, politics,
 the economy, the pandemic,
 your own personal crises and griefs
 and worries and fears...
 ...whatever is unstable or uncertain or unreliable,
 Moses' life and death
 proclaim an important,
 unchanging truth.
 Although everything around us and about us and for us may change,
 our relationship with God,

his protective, caring goodness,
the love that he has for us,
that does not change.
God can be our constant,
our one sure thing.
In our endings and in our beginnings,
God is always there.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.