

It was a moment of transition and as with most such moments, it was a time of high anxiety as well. Moses was preparing to die; and the people, who had not known the wilderness without him, were gripped with grief, fear, and doubt. Moses takes advantage of the situation to remind them how they got there. You might call it his “last will and testament.” More than just the closing scene we are visiting this morning, it is the entire book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah or Pentateuch, the last of the so called five books of Moses. Although written much later, of course, it is depicted as Moses’ final gift to this ornery people he has partnered with God in leading out of Egypt. Deuteronomy, meaning “second law” or “second reading,” is a rehearsal of the journey thus far that has brought them to the outskirts of their destination—the Promised Land—and preparation for settling into their new homeland. “Remember,” Moses will caution them again and again; and “as you go forward, take this word of wisdom with you. This is how a community that has covenanted with God should live.”

The story begins with the unfortunate but necessary reminder of the disastrous course of affairs that has brought them to this significant turn in their journey. Under Moses’ leadership and with God “in the midst of them”, they had stood at the edge of the land of promise once before—forty years ago, to be exact. But for their fear, they would have stepped across its borders then. God, Moses reminds them, had actually put the welcome mat out then, but they had drawn back and their fear and indecision had sentenced them to forty years of seemingly purposeless wandering.

You may remember hearing the story related by your childhood Sunday school teacher. Stepping up to that land of promise, they had sent scouts ahead to check things out and bring back a report. And bring back a report they did! Gathering samples of the lavish fruits produced so abundantly in that land flowing with milk and honey, the scouts came back with a resounding “yes!” “Yes, it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us.” Unfortunately, however, most of the scouts didn’t stop there. “But,” they warned, “the people are stronger and taller than we. The cities are huge and they’re fortified up to heaven!” (Dt. 1:28) Despite all that they had already been through, despite their journey through the sea, the provision of manna in the wilderness, the cloud signifying God’s presence with them by day and the pillar of fire by night, and despite the reassurances of Caleb and Joshua whose minority report insisting that they were up to the challenge, the people quaked with fear. There were *giants in the land!* And their hearts melted within them.

As they had done when they were just out of Egypt and facing the rigorous journey ahead, they began to complain. They complained against Moses and against God. “How dare you bring us here? We’re not going a step farther! Egypt may not have been a piece of cake, but better the devil we know, etc., and etc.” “Have no dread or fear of them,” Moses had sought to reassure them. “The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you. Remember God?” Moses asked them. “Remember God!” he commands them. God is the one who carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled through the wilderness to this very place. Trust the God who has gone before you, making a way. Trust the God who goes with you still” (Dt. 1:30-35). Disgusted with their fearful complaints, God made a decision: “Not a one of you will live to enter the land of promise, the land I promised your ancestors. Only your children (and your livestock) will live to enter it.”

Thus followed forty years and their arriving at the moment where we encounter them this morning. The original generation of adults has died off, save Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. The latter two, who had brought the faithful report to the people forty years ago, will lead the second generation into the land of promise; and Moses will die. “Oh, I pled with God,” Moses tells the people, “I pled that I might go with you. I prayed, and I prayed with all my heart: “O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours! Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan” (Dt. 3:24-25). But it was not to be. “The Lord,” Moses tells the people, “was angry with me *on your account!*” and would not grant his plea.

It seems unfair doesn’t it? Putting aside the theology that lay behind the story, putting aside the assigning of everything that happened to God and seeing pain, suffering, and death as God’s direct judgment upon sin, putting aside all of that, it still strikes us as unfair. If anyone, *anyone* deserved to go into the land flowing with milk and honey, this was the man. Having given up everything to take up the thankless task of leading this band of slaves out of Egypt, having taken up the rigorous task of making their way through a hostile wilderness, having lived with their grumbling and accusations for these forty years, having faithfully lived out God’s calling in his life only to be stopped short of that for which he had labored, Moses could well have been excused if he chose to rail out at the injustice of it all or at the very least, throw in the towel and descended

into a dark depression. Just at the moment when he seemed poised to see his efforts come to fruition, he knew he would see it only from a distance. Premature death would rob him of the joy of standing with his people to celebrate the rewards of a lifetime of faithfulness. Can you feel the poignancy, the deep sense of longing as he sat looking into a promised land for which he had given the better part of his life, knowing all the while that he would never set foot on it?

It reminds me of another good man, a man who literally lost everything—health, family, home, livelihood, the esteem of friends. We often speak of him in terms that scripture itself does not assign to him. We speak admiringly of “the patience of Job,” and we do so because we have not read closely and fail to take note of how again and again this supposedly patient man rails at God. Refusing to let go of his trust in the faithfulness of God, he refuses to follow his wife’s counsel and simply curse God and die. Refusing to accept the simplistic wisdom of the day that interpreted human suffering as sure evidence of secret sin, he refuses to make his contemporaries feel safe by wrapping everything up into a neat package for them. He does not and he will not accept their pious counsel that he fess up to cleverly hidden sin. “There is hope,” he laments in the midst of his anguished grief, “for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again. . . . But mortals die . . . and do not rise again” [14: 7, 10, 14]. Far from one who refuses to raise the hard questions, the story of Job is the story of a good man like Moses, a faithful man who looks torturous realities in the face and has the courage to wrestle with them.

Consider, too, that Job’s struggle represented the questions, not just of one man, but of an entire people. Thanks to the ruthless honesty of their prophets, they could offer no pretext of being blameless for their situation of exile. Yet the passing of almost an entire generation and the extent of their losses were such that the easy equations that had sufficed in the past were no longer sufficient. The psalmist, reflecting on the exile of his people, recalls the faithfulness of the God of covenant who promised to establish the throne of the great King David into perpetuity. “*But now,*” the psalmist protests accusingly to God, “you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant” [89:38-39, 44]. And then the anguished plea, “How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?” [89:46, 49]. “Is the great God of covenant,” the psalmist is asking himself, “to be trusted after all?”

The Bible, often referred to as a “book of answers,” is also a book of questions and apart from our recognizing the gut-wrenching character of the questions, the answers are meaningless. The passing of time, the shortness of life, gives our own questions a deep urgency. I recall my own father remarking as he moved through his later years, “It all seems like it was so short;” and my mother as she struggled with being left alone in painfully failing health, asking me, her preacher daughter, “Do you think God is punishing me for something?” And I think of my esteemed seminary teachers who imparted to me a depth of truth and a love for the lifelong journey of pursuing truth wherever it may lead. I think of those faithful, good men who themselves died in a time when the seminary they loved languished in exile. And finally, I think of our beloved friends who began with us the journey called Grace Covenant Church, who died far too soon, taking from us their good counsel, their gracious spirit, their strengthening presence for the challenges we would encounter.

Moses died, our passage this morning tells us; and “the Israelites wept for him thirty days. Then the period of mourning for Moses was ended, and they turned toward the journey left for them to make. And fortunately, the gifts he left behind served them well:

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 (Dt.43:9-10).

Perhaps it is just here that our struggle for answers finds some hope. Investing himself in faithfulness to the task to which God has called him, Moses takes under his wing Joshua, the leader who will take Israel into the land of promise. Rather than sulking about the unfairness of life or finding his refuge in the good old days that stretched out behind him, Moses used the treasures of God’s faithfulness in the past to equip the people whom he loved to face the future. This friend of God befriended those who would pick up the baton and continue the journey. Admittedly, Moses’ journey and all of the hopes he had bestowed upon his bickering people was unfinished; and admittedly, the journeys of those we have loved was unfinished as well—as will be our own. If, however, we would be a people of hope, we will place our trust in the one who called us in the first place, leaving a legacy of hope and faithfulness for those who will come after us.

Pondering the issues with which we struggle, a psalmist looks for God in the midst of the uncertainty that surrounds him and comes to some resolution. “Where,” he asks, “can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; *if I make my bed in the grave, you are there*”

(139:7-8). Even when the darkness threatens in those moments of trembling and fear to overtake him, the darkness, he finds, is as light to God (11-12). The God, who knew him even before he was born, and who has known him all of the days of his life is with him. “I come to the end,” he breathes in wonder and thankfulness, “I am still with you” [18].

And that is enough—enough both to get us through the painful loss of those we love and enough to sustain us when we, too, walk that valley. An African American spiritual reflects that sense of comfort. Coming from the days of slavery, days that certainly knew more than their share of pain, it finds comfort in the presence of the one who accompanies to the end:

We shall walk through the valley and the shadow of death
We shall walk through the valley in peace
If Jesus Himself shall be our leader
We shall walk through the valley in peace

“I come to the end,” we breathe with the psalmist in gratitude and wonder; “I am still with you.” Thanks be to God!