

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost- August 27, 2023

Scripture lesson: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

AS TIME GOES ON

Yes, at the end of Deuteronomy we're again with Moses. He's at the end of his life in this world. Most of his days have been devoted to leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and toward the Promised Land of Canaan. They're almost there now, and Moses climbs "to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite of Jericho". He sees across the Jordan River into Canaan, the land that has surely occupied his dreams for decades.

But then he dies. He never enters the Promised Land.

God had told him that this would happen because earlier Moses had disobeyed one of God's specific commands. It's no surprise to him, yet as Moses sees Canaan for the first time and knows that he won't enter it, what does he feel? Is it sadness? Regret? A sense of failure? What would we feel in his place?

I wonder if a big part of him was *relieved*. After all, the Promised Land didn't turn out to be everything that he first had heard. It was supposed to flow with milk and honey but much of its soil was actually rocky, thorny, and hard to make a living from.

From his vantage point on Mount Nebo, maybe Moses could see that, along with the fact that there were a lot of Canaanites who already lived there. Tough battles would have to be fought against them, and even though Deuteronomy 34 says that at 120 years old Moses remained clear-eyed and vigorous, I think there was still a good chance that he may have felt relieved not to have to fight, much less lead, such battles. Even when you're a healthy 120-year-old, I can imagine you might feel weary enough to let the prospect of that pass you by.

I remember first meeting my father-in-law, Fred Swearingen. He had been a Presbyterian minister for many years. At around age 60 he retired from a church in Corpus Christi, Texas that he had served for 25 years. He then started working as an interim minister which he loved and continued to do until he was 70. At that point he stopped, but only because his health would no longer allow him to do it.

Nevertheless, not long after he fully retired, he told me, "Kurt, I'm so glad that I'm not starting in the ministry now. The challenges for the church as I look ahead are massive. The times are so different.

"Back in the '50s and early '60s when I started most people went to church as a matter of course. Even those who didn't go knew that the church was an important institution. But now more and more people couldn't care less about it. Even among those who do care, the level of involvement with it isn't nearly what it used to be. So many things pull people in other directions.

"School and other sports teams with practices or even games on Sundays, including Sunday mornings- that used to be unheard of, but now it happens more and more. Walks and runs to raise money for various charities- those were never on Sundays, but now they are. People working on Sundays- that used to be rare, but not anymore.

“With so many other things going on, people start thinking of themselves as regular churchgoers if they attend worship only once a month. For most of my years, weekly attendance was still the strong norm. Yes, I’m glad that I’m done with the ministry now. I’m especially glad that I’m not just starting out in it.”

It’s common, I think, to get to a point when in looking back on our life we start to feel that prospects for the future don’t look very good. When he turned 75, Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, who died last year at the age of 96, said that when he was younger if somebody had offered him another thousand years of life on this earth, he would have jumped at the chance.

But once he turned 75, he wasn’t so sure. He said, “It seems that the eventual end to life might be preferable to the idea of an endlessly redundant extension of it.” He had lost his only brother and his closest friend. His body was breaking down. He still enjoyed his life, but everything was just harder. He said, “The one thing that I think I will miss when I die is seeing what becomes of my grandchildren; although, they say that we are never happier than our unhappiest child, and (the way the world’s future looks to me) if that gets expanded to include the next generation down, the result appears unthinkable.”

Time goes on. We get older and the future starts looking like something that we’re not keen on being to be part of. I know that my own dear mother expressed that feeling to me several times in her later years. Maybe some of you have said a similar thing to your loved ones. But what about Moses? What does he feel as he stands on Mount Nebo, looking across the Jordan River into Canaan?

Is it sadness, regret, a sense of failure, but also of relief? Likely all of those, I would bet, but I imagine that even more Moses felt *hope*. I’m talking about *real* hope, hope of the truest and deepest kind, hope that’s based not on us and on our accomplishments, but on God and on what God has done, is doing, and will do.

It’s easy to get fooled. It’s tempting to think that all of this really is about me and my life, about the years that I have on this earth and what I’m able to secure and accomplish in them for me and for mine- and not just for me and mine, but for the larger communities that I’m part of too, and for God’s whole, wide, beautiful, and aching world.

With real hope, though, we remember what our United Church of Christ’s most famous theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, once said- namely, that nothing ultimately worth doing can ever be achieved in a single lifetime. With our hope that rests in God we understand instead that we are all caught up in something that is so much greater. We realize that we’ve all been launched into the adventure of *God’s Reign*.

God’s Kingdom coming upon this earth as it is in heaven- that’s so much bigger than we are, so much more than anything that we could ever achieve or even imagine. It’s way beyond us and our lifetimes. It transcends history itself, and yet we are all a part of it. We’re called to embrace its vision, faithfully pointing to it in all the ways that we live now. We trust and we rejoice in God’s promise that we are all destined for the heavenly glory that it will bring.

We remember Martin Luther King, Jr. on the last night of his life. What did he see then? Preaching in Memphis, Tennessee he strongly sensed that he soon would be killed and he preached with Deuteronomy 34 clearly on his mind. Imagining himself like Moses on Mount Nebo, standing at the top of Pisgah, he said, “I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know . . . that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land . . . (S) o

I'm happy, tonight . . . I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Dr. King had seen the Promised Land in its greatest, grandest, and truest sense. Through his courageous gospel witness for civil rights and racial justice he had dreamed God's dream and embraced God's vision. He had built bright signposts for the rest of us, pointing us all to the life of perfectly mutual, vibrant, and loving harmony of all with all that God has desired for us and the whole creation from the start. He had seen the glory of God's Kingdom coming on this earth as it is in heaven- hallelujah!

But back to Moses now- what had he seen? He first had seen Egypt, that old land of Memphis, of the Nile River, the pyramids, and the sphinx. In the land of the Pharaohs, he had seen a kingdom that worshiped . . . what? It had worshiped power, wealth, status, and glamour. Moses had seen a kingdom there in which the poor existed only to be ground down into the sand or to serve at the beck and call of those few who were at the top.

But then Moses met Yahweh, the Holy One, who freed his people from slavery in Egypt. He followed this God's call to lead his people into the wilderness where Yahweh made an everlasting covenant with them. God gave them the gift of the Torah, the one in which he called them to *care for* the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the orphan.

At the end of his life now, Moses sees into the Promised Land. From the top of Pisgah, he looks into the valley of Jericho, and *with his eyes sharpened by God's gift of the Torah*, he can glimpse the new kingdom that is coming.

And with our eyes sharpened like his, we can see now what happens in Jericho when a certain Jesus of Nazareth shows up there. Jesus sees a blind beggar by the side of the road. The custom of his day is that if you see a beggar, you ignore him because he must be at moral or spiritual fault if begging is his lot. But Jesus stops and talks with the man. He restores his sight.

In Jericho, Jesus also sees a rich tax collector who's long been ripping off his fellow Jews in service to the Romans and to his own greed. His people despise him as a traitor, but Jesus calls to him and says, "Zaccheus, I want to come to your house and have dinner with you tonight." At table with Jesus, Zaccheus becomes a new man. He gives half of all that he has to the poor and he repays fourfold everyone that he has defrauded.

Jesus tells a story too about a man traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man is attacked by robbers and left half dead. A priest and a Levite both pass him by, but a Samaritan, a man that the fellow who's been beaten up would probably despise if given half a chance- that man stops, cares for him, and saves his life. With this Samaritan, Jesus says, we see further into God's Promised Land.

Eventually, Jesus himself takes the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. There he's confronted by his enemies, but refuses every effort to fight, crush, or kill them. Instead, he bears the full weight of their sin and forgives them. With Jesus, we see as far and as deep as we can now into the beauty of God's Promised Land. Looking with him, we marvel at the ways of God's Kingdom come.

And with Moses, right before he dies, we see more of it, too. At his death, it might seem that things are all over now for the Hebrew people because they've lost their greatest leader. But before he dies, Moses makes sure to lay his hands on Joshua as their new leader. He remains intent on doing what he can to see that everyone else will enter Canaan, even if he will not. To

the end of his life, Moses is not about him. He's about looking ahead and reaching out to bless others.

In the Egypt that Moses first had seen, and in our world that is so often like it, the usual message is that with our hands we should grab for ourselves. But in God's Promised Land our hands are not for selfish grabbing. They're for reaching out in blessing to everyone. In the coming of God's Kingdom, we don't say, "Lord, bless me." We say, "Lord, use us to bless others."

We've all been launched into the adventure of *God's Reign*. It is what our life is truly about, both here and now and in the world to come. It *is* so much bigger than we are, so much more than we can ever achieve or even imagine. It is way beyond us and our lifetime. It transcends history itself, *and yet we are all a part of it*. We are destined for the heavenly glory that it will bring.

All the way there, right up to our end here- whether it be the end of our lives personally, the end of the life of this dear congregation, the end of the life of our beloved country, or even the end of all life as we have known it on this wondrous planet- ALL the way to the end we keep embracing the vision of God's Kingdom come. We do that by pointing faithfully to it with all the ways that we live now, caring for the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the orphan, loving and forgiving even our enemies, using our hands, not for selfish grabbing, but for reaching out in blessing to all God's people.

That's the way we live now because we have true hope- hope in God and in what God has done, is doing, and will do. We hope and we rejoice in God's promise that all of us indeed are bound for the Promised Land! Amen.