

Preparing for the Next Chapter  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
Date: September 15, 2019

18:00

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Numbers 20 & Deuteronomy 34

So, this morning's scripture...

If you were a rabbi or Jewish religious scholar, you would know the scripture from Numbers today as one of the most debated and controversial of the Torah or the first five books of the Bible.

In this scripture Moses goes to God with the always present complaints of the Israelites, gets directions on how to get water, gets the water flowing, only to be told that because of this, Moses himself will not get into the Promised Land.

What? This man who has led this fractious group of folks around and around for forty years after saving them from Pharaoh and leading them to freedom? He doesn't get to enter? Because he didn't hit the rock right somehow? And even if Moses did something wrong, couldn't God forgive him?

Even to early Biblical scholars this seemed off.

Theories abounded. Perhaps it was because Moses fell on his face to talk to God and that wasn't the right way to address God. Perhaps because Moses hit the rock twice, not once. Perhaps because Moses yelled at the people and basically said, "pipe down and drink the water already!" Or maybe because Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to the rock as God instructed. Moses didn't follow directions.

Maybe, as one person put it, Moses couldn't cross the Jordan because the Promised Land was a "non-prophet organization"....yes, I know that's a bad one.

So what is up with this scripture and why am I preaching on it today?

There is another chain of thought that looks at Moses' inability to enter the Promised Land a bit differently. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a contemporary scholar, reflects that:

"One of the most striking features of Judaism is that it is not centred on a single figure - a founder - who dominates its entire history. To the contrary, each age gave rise to its own leaders, and they were different from one another, not only in personality but in the type of leadership they exercised.

"First came the age of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Then came Moses and his disciple Joshua. They were followed by a succession of figures known generically as 'judges',...With Saul, monarchy was born - though even then, kings were not the only leaders; there were prophets and priests as well. And so on through the centuries up til now with its rabbis, scholars and commentators.

"Leadership is a function of time....Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. ...And because he or she is of a specific generation, even the greatest leader cannot meet the challenges of a different generation. That is not a failing. It is the existential condition of humanity...For each of us, there is a Jordan we will not cross, however long we live, however far we travel."

In other words, Moses didn't enter the Promised Land because his time was over. In the 40 years since leaving Egypt, the older generation who were slaves there would have died. Miriam, Moses' sister, has died. Aaron has died. A new generation will enter the Land, one that knows itself to be free. It's not so much an age issue, but a difference in perspective and vision. The task is different.

And there is new leadership, too. Joshua is ready for the task. Instead of leading people through the wilderness, the new task, as we learn in the book of Joshua, is to take up living in the Promised Land, which ends up requiring clearing it of those who live there first. It's more of a military campaign than a survivalist camp. Whatever we think of the next phase in the Israelites story, it is clearly a new chapter.

And so it is with Pilgrim right now, too. We are coming to the end of our Interim Time together. We have wandered through the wilderness of history reflections and community conversations. We have tried new worship practices and meeting formats. We have found ourselves in desert-like places of grief and wondered if Pilgrim was destined to move on. And we have found oases of hope and light and love and celebration. We've wandered a lot and covered a lot of ground.

Now we stand looking into the near distance to the Promised Land. A new settled pastor has been called and the time of preparation is almost over. You will no longer be in the in-between time, but rather you will move into that new chapter whatever it will hold, joy and sorrow alike.

It is time for a new chapter. A new leader. A new people. You are not the same people as you were when we met two years ago. I don't just mean the new folks who have joined us or those who have passed on or left. I mean we have changed together. You all have let go of much of the hurt of the past and looked again to each other asking how God is leading you all forward. A shift from surviving, to embracing the mystery and ministry of what is next.

And I won't be going into that promised land with you. I don't claim to be Moses or a great leader of a nation of people. But in this moment in time, I get to look out from a great height and see what is coming for all of you, but I don't get to go with you. You will move into it together remembering that leaders change but the congregation remains.

Timothy Simpson, biblical commentator writes in his article *The Politics of Being Replaced*: "the focus was never supposed to be on the leader. It is [God] who leads the people and who is the focal point of the community's life inside and outside of the text." This true for Moses and for us as well, and not just in the life of the church.

There are many times in our lives when we realize this bittersweet truth. Parents take their now-grown, but still not totally grown, child off to college. They get them set up in their room. And then....then they leave because the parents do not travel into that new frontier, that new land. They can just stand and watch as their child launches out alone.

This is true when we watch loved ones go off to serve in the military and know that we will not go with them, nor probably ever be able to fully understand what they live through and deal with.

This happens when a family member watches a loved one cross the border and disappear into the peril and possibility that lie on the other side.

We watch but cannot go. The other goes off alone.

When my mother came down with breast cancer she had to have chemotherapy and radiation. I went with her to her chemo appointment and at one point she was led off to be treated and in that particular visit I could not go with her. I had to watch her travel to that place alone. [She is now healthy and a survivor of almost 10 years.]

Well, those who go on without us are not really alone. We believe, we trust, we lean on the truth that God is present with us, with those we love, just as God moves with this changed band of wanderers into that Promised Land. Leadership changes, families change, work and friends change, health changes, church changes, but God remains steadfast and sure.

God went with the Israelites into the Promised Land. God was with them in their good moments and bad, into their wars and their peace. God was there when they wanted a king and stood by those kings even with their grave faults to the very end. And God went with the people into exile. And so on and so on. New chapters unfolded over the course of history. Our history.

So here we are in this moment of history. Bittersweet. But not alone. May God go with us all as we cross the Jordans of our lives and as we watch those we love move into Promised Lands beyond where we can go. Amen.