

“They Will Not Be Orphaned”
(Deuteronomy 34:1-12; John 14:15-21)

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There are two sentiments in the readings today that I want to share this morning, because they help us to think about this month’s theme of “Passing the Baton.”

The first comes from our first reading. It is the feeling that goes with having lived a full life and knowing that the future belongs to a younger generation and having it sink in that we will not be going there.

Moses, who led his people out of bondage in Egypt, led them through the wilderness, and went up God’s Holy Mountain to bring them the Commandments, who argued constantly with God on their behalf... that Moses has finally reached the end of his natural life span.

He goes up on a mountaintop overlooking the Promised Land and after gazing on it, God tells him that he will not be crossing into it with the people. And so he is laid to rest there, at the edge of the Promised Land and all the people mourn.

The people mourn because Moses was the greatest person they had ever known. The generation born in the wilderness had never known a day in which Moses had not been there on center stage, struggling tooth and nail with God on their behalf. But the time of mourning was

also a time of transition, in which the “baton of leadership” was passed to Joshua and to a younger generation that would lead the people into the Promised Land.

This passage has played an important role in the history of our country. The Puritans were inspired by visions of the Promised Land, when they took the dangerous sea voyage to what for them was a new world. And we can also link the vision of the Promised Land with the vision of the “American Dream”, that has drawn millions to flee their oppressors and start a new life here.

And in the 1960’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drew directly from this passage, when he said:

We have some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter with me now. I’ve been to the mountaintop... I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

He was murdered less than twenty-four hours after delivering these words. But they continue to live in the hearts of many as one of the purest expressions of our hope for the future.

The story of the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land is a universal story that every generation can use as a blueprint for finding

its place in history. And so, it is profitable for us to also consider where we fit. Clearly, we are in a place where the grumbling and division among our people matches the grumbling and division amongst the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. And we too are struggling as a people, to maintain our faith that the Promised Land is our destiny. It is a story of ongoing struggle.

Peace in the Transition

At the same time there is, something beautiful and tranquil about this final moment in Moses' life, as he gazes out across the Promised Land. Even though he will not enter it, at least not in this world, he does get to see it. And that seems to be enough for him.

I think the part of the reason this moment is so beautiful is because Moses doesn't seem to have a problem with the fact that he won't get there himself. In any case, he doesn't make a scene about it. My guess is that, as Moses surveyed the Promised Land with his eyes, he realized that what he was seeing was already present within himself in such a way that, he had no need to actually go there. I imagine him feeling the kind of wonder and peace that we feel inside ourselves, when we stand high on a mountain and look out over the landscape.

Some people think of the Promised Land as literally a place that you have to get to and possess. But my understanding is that the Promised Land” in the Bible, we are invoking a deeper meaning: that the Promised Land is first of all a state of being, it is where ever we happen to be when we awaken to the vision God wants to share with us. The actual location is secondary. That is why Moses doesn’t actually have to go there to already be there.

And it is why, when Dr. King envisioned the “Promised Land,” what he saw had less to do with any specific location, than it had to do with seeing little black and white children playing together and where people were being valued without regard for the color of their skin. And the location in which he envisioned it was everywhere.

I think of finding the Promised Land a bit like when a puzzler searches until he or she finds the place where her piece fits into the puzzle of life. There is an experience of joy and relief when your piece clicks into place. There is a knowledge that you now carry deep down inside as a source of comfort and security, so that no matter where you are, or what the problems are, you know you already belong to that special place, even though you will never actually reach it in this earthly life.

I think this must have been something like what Dr. King understood when he said, “It doesn’t really matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land.” In some ways, his knowing that he had been to the mountaintop seems to have given his own life a lesser importance in his own eyes, when he compared it to the needs of the next generation.

I think that is a beautiful gift of growing older; that once we have seen the Promised Land, our own neediness on our own behalf begins to evaporate. And we can shift into a natural compassion for the younger generation and a concern for what we can do to help them in their own quest to enter into the Promised Land.

Providing for the Next Generations

This desire to meet the needs of the next generation provides us with a segue into the Gospel reading. The Gospel reading addresses the second sentiment that I wanted to lift up today. And that is our concern for how our loved ones will be cared for, when we are no longer here in earthly form to advocate for them.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus reassures us with these words:

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I

live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

To me, these words encapsulate the way God loves us and the way we love our children. We want them to be able to find and dwell in the Promised Land. And so we are concerned about who will look after them after we are gone. Who will be their compass in the storm of life? Our deepest concern is that they not be orphaned or lost without hope

And Jesus's answer is this: Just because we do not see him anymore, it does not mean he is not alive and with us. We live in each other. I live in you, you live in me and we live in God. And for this reason, they will not be orphaned.

Not Orphans

One of the things that has always fascinated me, is how young actors become seasoned actors. When a young actor or actress gets up on a stage, there is an illusion that takes place. The actor appears to be all alone. It is all on her now, and she has to have her wits about her and not succumb to stage fright, in order to fulfill her role.

But in some ways our impression that the actor is alone is an illusion. All the while that she is on stage, her acting coach is with her in spirit; not only her coach, but all the people who have cared for her and

supported her growing up, who built up her confidence when she was faltering, who helped her memorize lines; they are all with her. Even the audience, with its cheers and applause are supporting her and willing her to succeed. And they all together represent the truth of Jesus's words, that "even though we do not see him, he is with us and will not leave us orphaned."

And this applies to all our life situations. Take the 'relay race' as our basic example. There is a point, when you are running your leg of the race, where it gets tough. You are winded and you want to let up. But everything is riding on you and you feel that you have to finish as best you can. You know that every ounce of energy you put in, will advantage the next runner and the whole team. And the good news is that you are not really alone. There is a "cloud of witnesses"; both the people in the stands and the saints in your life that no-one can see, who are there with you, encouraging and cheering you on.

I particularly like the relay race as an example, because of the way it focuses on the baton pass. That is the moment when the crowd holds its breath. It is the moment when everything has to be done with full attention and awareness. Everything is in motion and it takes only a momentary lapse for the baton to fall.

This is also true of our lives. Things are always moving and changing and so paying attention and getting the timing and placement right are an essential for us to successfully impart, what the next generation needs to carry forward with them.

When we are passing the baton, we have to be aware of two directions at the same time. We are reaching back to ensure that we have properly received what comes to us from the past and we are looking forward so that we will not stumble and so that we will see clearly the hand reaching out to take the baton from us.

And it seems to me that this is tricky, because in difficult times like these, I think it is tempting to fixate our eyes on the past, reminiscing and looking back to the extent that we forget to look ahead to the future and to the hands that the younger generation are extending to us as they reach for the baton.

What Moses Sees

All of this sounds very frantic. But I'd like to return to the feeling of calm that I think we can find in Moses at the end of his life. He carries in his old body many decades of struggle and experience. But his eyes are not on the past. It's not even clear to me that they are on the future. It seems more to me that he is just taking in what is being laid out before

him in the present. He doesn't have to do anything now. He doesn't even need to try to go there. He can just stand there on the mountaintop of life and appreciate what is laid out before him.

I like this vision of Moses looking out over the land from the mountaintop, because I also think that life is not just about being concerned for the past and the future or running a race and fulfilling responsibilities. At the point where the hand off is being made, Moses just stands there looking at all that has unfolded before him in a simple spirit of appreciation.

I don't know about you. There are a lot of things I'm not happy about in this life. But deep down, I'm happy for the life God has given me and for being touched by his love. I feel that, although I won't get there in this life, I've seen it and that is enough for me, too. So hopefully on that last day, I to can will go easily and gratefully, without a scene, like Moses did. I hope that I won't worry about the people I am leaving behind, because somehow God will not leave them orphaned. I hope that when I go, it will be with a sense of peace, the way you feel when you are walking back down the mountain after seeing the whole landscape spread out before you. And I hope you don't mind that I wish the same for you.

