

CMCL
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Deuteronomy 34:1–12

For the last two months, our worship here at CMCL has been framed around the stories in Exodus of *THE Exodus* plumbing the stories of the Hebrews' community and identity formation: Jonathan & Malinda & Louise & Teman & Verna & I have taken turns preaching through from the story of the baby Moses' adoption to Moses being cradled by God in the rift'd rock. These are stories written *about* folks triumphantly, imperfectly, ficklely being birthed from slavery to new life, lurching through the wilderness to freedom. Written *by* folks making sense of a different captivity hundreds of years later interpreted *by* us – a bunch of folks living a different wilderness, this time thousands of years later. We can rightly question the historicity of these accounts, and yet. And yet. Can it be so far from the truth?

There are two tidbits of wisdom I bring myself to mind whenever I'm confronted with historicity concerns: The first tidbit I learned in chaplaincy training – Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) practicing the writing and sharing of verbatims, where you attempt to capture, word for word, if possible, pastoral care interactions you've had and then share those with your supervisor and fellow chaplains in training, and attempt to learn better pastoring, and most of all, better self-awareness. I confessed to my CPE supervisor one time, "I'm really not confident that I'm capturing what I actually said in these verbatims. I second guess my memory a lot, and I wonder if I'm unconsciously editing to make myself say something a little better than I did in real life." My CPE supervisor, far from being concerned, just chuckled. "Don't worry: you couldn't really hide yourself even if you tried. You would still be there, as true as ever, in whatever fiction you manufactured."

The second tidbit was one I was told when I first tried to identify my Enneagram number. I was waffling between a few numbers, struggling to discern what I *wanted* to be from what I most likely was. I either read or was told, that a really helpful litmus test is, which number are you most embarrassed by reading? If it makes you squirm a bit, it's likely hitting close to home, which means, "Bingo! You've found your number." So, let's not fool ourselves – we (as in humanity) are all over these Exodus stories, whether or not any real-life Indiana Jones ever digs up the Ark of the Covenant or not; you can't get off the hook of these stories by being a historical skeptic. There's way too much embarrassing stuff here; and as they say, the truth is often stranger than fiction. Chafing under oppression; being overwhelmed or reluctant at being shoulder tapped to lead in escaping generational slavery bonding over shared hard times, and bonding over complaint regarding leaders & conditions; demanding that we not starve in the wilderness; trying to make concrete items to project our fears and hopes and worries

onto when we feel alone or leaderless. These things ring true, true, true and true. So, let us come to today's text with open eyes & honest hearts.

We've skipped to the end of Deuteronomy, but this is still part of the Exodus story, and here we find Moses, about to die. The people are still in the wilderness but they've reached the end of it and they're about to cross over into the Promised Land. And God says to Moses: "You have reached your destination." "No, I mean it. You have to stop *here*. You've brought your people out of Egypt, and you can now see The Promised Land. *They* can enter the land now, but *you* cannot enter it, Moses." **It is for your descendants.** Which, also, is what I said to Abraham, too: **This [land] will be for your descendants.**

We are the descendants and the ancestors. We are the ones who light candles, for recently departed dear ones, and for ancestors whose names we don't even know to speak. And we are the ones for whom candles will one day twinkle on this table or some other altar beyond our imagining. There are some specific reasons God gives to Moses, in chapter 32, as to why he will not be able to enter Canaan: "Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; ⁵⁰you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; ⁵¹because both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites. ⁵²Although you may view the land from a distance, you shall not enter it—the land that I am giving to the Israelites."

Moses was not a perfect man, nor a perfect leader. He led the people out of Egypt, and to the Promised Land, as God had called him to do: but he certainly struggled along the way. This story doesn't sit well with our current culture: at least not the one we teach in our stories. It doesn't seem fair. If there's some cosmic balance, it seems like Moses must have done enough good to balance out the bad. I find myself wanting to complain to the teacher on behalf of Moses' grades: "But he worked really hard! If he doesn't get the A in this class, he can't get into his 1st choice college!" Come on, can't you do something? And so I wonder, what does it mean to get all the way *to* the Promised Land and not be allowed in? Moses tried to blame the Israelites for their faithlessness, but the Israelites were allowed in. Once again, it is the descendants and the people of Israel who will walk into the Promised Land.

Honestly, I think there's a maturity in this story that feels like it could speak very well to us here and now about how Moses' work was not in vain, just because he was left behind, because his story ended right when the new era began. Moses does not say he never would have freed his people, if he'd known *he* couldn't get into the Promised Land, too. The work Moses was called to do, all work of liberation that any of us are called to lead, or to follow into, is about more than ourselves. I believe that Moses'

journey was the saving of him, *just as much* as the Israelites' journey was the saving of them.

Whatever work we do in the name of liberation is for our community and for our descendants. And when it gets around to our descendants, their work will be for *their* community & descendants. We do not do the work for our own salvation, *although* I believe that the work, as we are enabled to do it by the Love and Grace of God *is* necessary for the working out of our own salvations: it is holy work, to be done with fear and trembling and also laughter and company: this work of allowing transformation in our own lives, and being courageous, loving and loyal neighbors to our communities across time and space. Maybe "work" is too fraught or negative a word, but I don't know if it's better: for there are times when no effort seems needed, but there are times when love requires every ounce of grit and strength and surrender within us. The many people who have participated in the #metoo movement over the last few weeks, sharing publicly that "they, too" are survivors of sexual harassment? They are doing work, in order that their community and their descendants might one day be freed of sexual harassment and violence. What a Promised Land that would be. Many who share their stories do so at great cost, to their credibility, to their safety, to their relationships. But the cost of silence is too high for some to pay, anymore. So those who can, speak for themselves and for those who can't.

I am who and what and where I am, in larger part than I can even fathom, because of the people who came before me, whose prayers and choices have molded my opportunities and given me strength and inspiration like angels, unawares. And I am who and what and where I am, in larger part than I can even fathom, because of the people in my web of relationships now, the strangers near at hand, and neighbors far away who are inspiring and inviting me, and critiquing and supporting me. And we remember that, in Moses' 120-year lifespan, the vast majority of his days were spent tending sheep, or leading his people from nowhere to nowhere in the wilderness.

Not every day is a burning bush day, or a Passover, or a parting of the Red Sea, nor is every day even a Moses day. Most days of our lives, we are not the front man in the band, or the prophet whose staff parts the sea. Most days we are trying to faithfully keep ourselves and our beloved, infuriating, communities on a safe path in the wilderness.

I returned this week to Sharon Welch, a religious studies and women's & gender studies professor who has greatly shaped my ethical thinking. One of her key questions is exploring: "How does a movement persist in the face of partial victories and continued defeats?" For her, the answer was to develop **an ethic of risk**: the complexity of social problems and the inability to perceive how they might be resolved often results in a middle-class failure of nerve, "the inability to persist in resistance when the problems are seen in their full magnitude." "Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are

possible, the creation of the ***conditions of possibility*** for desired changes." It is found in taking steps toward a desired goal, and focusing on *possibilities*, rather than *outcomes*, choosing "to care and to act **although there are no guarantees of success.**" Although I immersed myself in her scholarly writing in seminary it was not until this week, leading up to our All Saint's remembrance today, that I read Welch's description of her own parents: They lived lives of service but with no sense of guilt, duty, or sacrifice. They acknowledged defeat, but with no sense of fallen-ness or original sin. They focused on the direction of the Spirit, the ways in which they were being led to new horizons of creativity and service. . . . The heart of their life and work was clear: building the kingdom of God on earth. (*After Empire*)

I lit a candle this morning for Dr. Welch who, though still living, is a bright flame to me, whose light has shone, and continues to light my way. One whose words and actions inspire me to get out of bed and gather manna again each a.m. to keep going, keep praying, keep acting, keep supporting others, even in the face of daily evidence that makes the Promised Land seem foolishly far away, if not entirely fictional. You are all saints who inspire me on a daily basis, too. In the ways you live with medical challenges, in the ways you insist on creativity and expression in the midst of destruction all around, support one another, and support me to organize and protest systemic injustice, build sustaining practices in your daily lives, share your gifts and energy here, show up so diligently in your professions: to me these candles embody loving-care ... that we are not forgotten, nor abandoned nor lost, even in our wanderings. Nor are we let off the hook to continue forging toward a time and place where all will be healed.

Prem Dick

Lois Blough

Roland Stock

Emma Hess

Daryl Garber

Paul Leatherman

Kate Couturier

Phil Detweiler

Dieter Jacobs

Rachel Stauffer

Gwen Peachey

Glen Lapp

Marc Siemens

Ferd Doermer

Bonnie Gingrich