

"The Frailty of Life"
or "The Faithfulness of God"
or "A Survey From Atop"

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-40

I want to note that I flubbed when I provided Alicia the worship information for our bulletin. I obviously included the two sermon titles you have in your bulletin but I failed to include a title that is perhaps the most important concept I want us to consider. Thus, "A Survey From Atop" is actually a 3rd title. The one I forget to include is "or 'The Faithfulness of God'". Thus the first two should be seen in their proper sequence: "The Frailty of Life" or "The Faithfulness of God". The reason this is critical to consider is that, yes, Moses was a flawed prophet of God but his flaws and instances of disobedience could never in any way invalidate the promises of God or overshadow the faithfulness of God.

To tell the truth, I wasn't sure how I was going to begin my sermon this morning. Yes, I prayed for the Spirit's leading and prompting but I found my enthusiasm for our OT lesson wanting to run away with me. For those who had opportunity to see it, this past Thursday afternoon I recorded a brief FB video introduction to today's worship. My encouragement was for folks, those who were so moved and able to do so, to read both Bible texts with a particular emphasis on our OT lesson. While some of us have a favorite Bible verse or story, or two, others have many more "favorites". I find myself in this latter category. But that being said, I have long found great inspiration and deep meaning in this striking passage detailing the last days of Moses' life. My encouragement was for folks to read this passage with one's mind's eye to envision what it was that took place at the top of Mt. Nebo.

Part of what makes this passage so profound, at least for me, is that it contains and reveals some of the most profound elements of Reformed Theology. In particular, it does not deny but reminds us that, yes, Moses was a sinner and had been disobedient, but God is faithful in a way that is as magnanimous as it is heart-warming. Yes, we fail, but God is faithful!

Thus, I couldn't help myself but to conceive not only 2 sermon titles but 3! As I mentioned, the first title is "The Frailty of Life" which is reference to Moses's humanness, Moses's frailty, his inability to fully comply with God's instructions. Even his best intentions were not enough. And yet, God does not cast Moses out of his good will. "The Faithfulness of God" as a title is meant to credit God, and to bring glory to God, for his faithfulness to a frail human being who did not always do his best nor always do as he was instructed. All this, in turn, led to our third and final title, "A Survey From Atop".

A couple winters ago I, as a Bickleton school bus driver, was assigned to drive our basketball team to a game at Glenwood. I had never been to Glenwood before. A quick look at a map of Washington showed me how to get there. The flat-relief map, however, gave no inkling of what the landscape was like. From my relatively brief time getting acquainted with Washington state, at least in terms of this region, the map suggested I needn't worry about what I would see as I drove along in terms of geography. The geographical landscape, I learned early on, is quite varied and different from place to place. And even

surprisingly so! A very flat landscape can instantly become a canyon a boy from Nebraska wouldn't anticipate. I think you get the idea. Nebraska has hills and valleys but no canyons. Therefore I am always amazed at the canyons of this part of our beautiful state. Coming back from a bus run to Alderdale, as I drive northwest along the canyon just to the north and west of the Hale place on Hale Road my eyes always keep a close watch on the canyon just to my right but which drops off sharply. That would NOT be a place to have a flat steering axle tire or moment of inattention that might cause a bus, car, or pickup to veer off the road. That canyon is amazing. But, I think that one pales in comparison to the canyon that Rock Creek cuts through. I never cross Rock Creek canyon without being amazed.

As to the bus trip to Glenwood, you may have anticipated what I'm going to say next. I'd never seen, or crossed, the Klickitat River canyon. But I can still remember coming around the corner where you get your first view of that magnificent canyon. It wasn't like Rock Creek, it was far more! As I drove the first half mile or so I became even more aware of the incredible expanse before me. I had to remind myself that I was a bus driver with a bus load of kids in my care! This wasn't a private scenic tour. But the view that opened up before me was absolutely breath taking. I can still see the diagonal yellow warning sign at the top of the grade indicating the nature of the road ahead. Not only did it indicate a winding and steep slope there was a little sign attached noting that the grade was 4 miles long. "4 miles?!" I silently exclaimed. "4 miles?!" Rock Creek is something like 1 ½ miles to the bottom. But "4 miles"? But what a spectacular view!

I wasted a whole lot of sermon time on this point, as, to my mind, there had to be something along these lines in terms of God and Moses. "...Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the **whole** land-- from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar." (NIV)

There was Moses, standing on top of Pisgah, looking out over the Promised Land displayed before him in all its ruggedness and natural beauty. However it pleases us or displeases us, we are not given a word as to what Moses thought or said as he ascended the mountain. We are not given a word as to his emotions as he climbed that last bit of this journey, that is, as he took in with his own eyes for the first time the scenic vista that opened up before him. And on top of that (pun intentionally left in here), there he was alone with the LORD. We are not told of any exchange between them, only of what the LORD spoke to his imperfect prophet.

But even though Moses spoke not a word in the text we read a moment ago, perhaps it is rightly said, "There was nothing left to say." For Moses had recently said his earthly goodbye to the people of God he, Moses, loved so much and for whom he had interceded when the LORD was angry with them. If you would like a bit of homework that I think will bless you richly, please, at perhaps a quiet time later today take a prayerful look at chapter 33 of Deuteronomy, the

chapter just prior to today's OT lesson. The last recorded words we have of Moses are found there, and they are as profound as they are rich and uplifting. My Bible has chapter 33 headlined "Moses Blesses the Tribes [of Israel]". I think it might better be headlined "Moses blesses the Tribes [of Israel] and the LORD". I say this because among the very last words of Moses we find: "Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword....." (Deuteronomy 33:29, NIV) In the end, Moses was crediting God with all the marvelous things he not only had done in the past but is convinced he will continue to do in the future. A word about the future we will consider at the end of our sermon.

As some of you know, Deuteronomy is the final book of what is known as the Pentateuch, the 5 scrolls or 5 books of Moses. It is more than fitting that the story of God's first and greatest prophet ends on a high note. In one sense it is somber in tone, for Moses, the one who had interceded for the people when the LORD seemed ready to destroy them and thus Moses saved their disobedient necks. The people's beloved leader and protector has died. They grieved, wept, and mourned for 30 days. That's only 10 days less than the 40 days Moses was on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments. They grieved deeply and openly.

But the text does not focus too long on the issue of grief. The over all tone is not celebratory as we typically think of the word. The text presents a tone and mood that celebrates in another way. Perhaps similar to the way I was essentially speechless as I first looked over the Klikitat River gorge, but on the other hand there was probably a greater sense of the majesty of the Promised Land as Moses saw it. We are not told but I am inclined to believe that Moses experienced an inner, almost inexplicable and inescapable, sense of quiet joy, gratitude, and wonder. I also wonder if Moses didn't have some final thoughts about what lay ahead for the people he had led out of the land of bondage but who would now have to go on without him. The future..... What would it hold?

Part of what is behind my sermon this morning is our present and future. As you may have noticed, my past couple sermon applications had to do with our present election season and Supreme Court nomination. I don't know about you, but for me it's been very draining in terms of mind, emotion, and spiritual health. More and more folks have suggested they are ready for these days to be over and I agree with that.

Therefore I was very pleased to find our OT lesson as specified by the Lectionary. It seems quite appropriate for today. This OT story and lesson has always been one that lifts my spirits, even when they are not actually down for any particular reason. The Lord gently mentions to Moses that he, Moses, will not be going into the geographical Promised Land. Moses knows all too well that this is because he had been disobedient. Moses doesn't need it rubbed in his face. More importantly the LORD reaffirms his covenant promise that the Promised Land will indeed become the home land to the Israelites. I wonder if Moses wept a few tears of joy knowing that the people will always be the people of God and that the LORD is the one God of all creation that can be trusted. In fact, all other gods are nothing more than human fabrications. There is one God

and one God alone. And the promises of God are irrevocable. They are trustworthy and true. That is why I drafted the 2nd sermon title: The Faithfulness of God.

I think this story from Deuteronomy dovetails into and pairs quite nicely with our Gospel lesson. Here we find an expert in the law asking Jesus about which is the greatest commandment in the Law. Quoting the very words spoken by Moses, as found in Deuteronomy 6:5 [the opening verse of the brief passage known famously as the "Shema"] Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. As I understand it, the Shema [Dt 6:5-9] was typically the first Scripture a Jewish boy or girl would memorize; it was that critically important. Jesus of course went on adding, "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [taken from Leviticus 19:18] All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Thursday I saw a FB meme someone posted noting how we should never forget that not only can we disagree with others, even strongly, and still remain friends, but that it is critically important that we do remain as friends, in spite of our differences. Recently it has been noted that Justice Scalia and Justice Bader-Ginsburg, even though they, philosophically, were at great odds with one another, they deeply loved and respected each other. They and their families were very close and spent many holidays and other special days together over the years. Also, Thursday it was noted that, at the end of the Barrett nomination proceedings, Senators Graham and Feinstein, who are philosophically at odds with one another, exchanged a warm hug and some genuinely warm and kind words with each other. It is outrageous and a tragedy that Feinstein was immediately excoriated for having the audacity to do such a charitable thing as hug Graham. The Scripture doesn't say "love your neighbor as long as you agree on matters of public policy and philosophy." There is no such proviso.

I am convinced that Moses would have understood that the Israelites would have days and years of successes as she would have days and years of failures, though he couldn't have had the slightest idea of what they would actually be. But he knew two things. First, as we've already covered, he knew that God was faithful and good, faithful in all his ways and good to the people whether they deserved it or not. He would not and indeed could not renege on his covenant promises. This was the nature of God - his faithfulness.

As inferred earlier, Israel would have failures, the ramifications of which they would surely mourn over and regret. And thus, second, they would surely want to attempt to do the best they could in terms of faithfulness and understanding.

Our OT lesson, coupled with our Gospel lesson, is a lesson for us to continue on in hope, fidelity, and faithfulness. During these trying days of ours, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, speaking where we can and should and in whatever ways we can and is right for a true disciple of Jesus. We do not know our future any more than Moses did that of his people. We must just do what is right, doing what we believe the Lord would have us do, whether in terms of what we do or how we do it.

As a final word I want to highlight the over-arching theme of the book of Joshua, which follows immediately on the heels of Deuteronomy. After the death of Moses, his protégé and successor Joshua had the calling and task of leading the Israelites into the long awaited, long anticipated, and immensely desired Promised Land. If the coming enterprise had ever been considered as an easy task to be accomplished, the people would soon be disabused of such a flawed notion. Joshua 1:6-7 sets forth the stage and offers a word of encouragement. The LORD says to Joshua, who was then to pass it on to the people of God, "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go." (NIV)

The essential point here is that the way forward would rarely be easy. Be strong and courageous. And lest we misunderstand the coming mission, it was NOT a secular endeavor. It was a religious endeavor set in what some see as a secular setting. The LORD continued, saying, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:8-9 NIV)

My ultimate purpose this morning is to urge us to not be dispirited by the current events underway, but be strong and courageous! Be encouraged by God's grace and mercy shown to an aged and flawed prophet. Be encouraged that we have the Lord Jesus who intercedes for us in terms of our sin, shortcomings, and timidity. Remain faithful to our Judao-Christian ethics and foundation. Be strong and courageous not only through November 4th but every day of our lives thereafter as well. Amen.