

Deuteronomy 34 (NRSV)

34 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴ The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” ⁵ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶ He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷ Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸ The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹ Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹ He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and

Mapleton Jan 4 2009

his entire land, ¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Well this is a very important – but sometimes forgotten passage in the Bible. After leading the children of Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt --- through wandering in the wilderness for 40 years --- through the miracles of manna from heaven ... and water from rocks. Moses has led his people to the brink of the Promised Land. Yet he will never set foot on it!

That seems very harsh ... doesn't it? Almost as if God has taken Moses up to see what it is he is going to miss out on! Imagine standing there looking over at this land of milk and honey ... seeing the eland promised by God to his children ... and then being told you will not enter it! And not only will you not enter it ... but you will die. If we look at the passage from this perspective it seems almost cruel.

But God is not cruel ... so to read this passage as such is missing the point. I think that the point of this passage is that change is often necessary. And what better time to look at this passage then today --- as we stand on the brink of a new year. So let us look with fresh eyes upon this passage before we venture into this New Year ... and this Promised Land.

Mapleton Jan 4 2009

First, I want to make one point perfectly clear ... I do not ascribe to the view that the 'Promised Land' is a literal piece of land laying in the area we now think of as Israel. Especially, as we look at the pain and suffering in that so-called Promised Land over this last week ... I think that the doctrine of a specific land is rather dangerous and counter-productive. Rather I would invite you to think of the Promised Land in a more metaphorical sense ... just as Jesus taught in parables so too I think God communicates in metaphors. The Promised Land --- the Land of Milk and Honey --- is meant to represent something that is to be compared to the experience of the Israelites in 'Egypt' and in the 'wilderness'. All of these locations are more important for what they represent than for their particular location.

Egypt of course represents oppression and bondage. A land that was not their own. A land where the children of God were not only aliens or foreigners but were slaves. We have no such experience in our lives ... or do we? Are there times that we are living in foreign lands ... not the lands for which we as Children of God were created? Are there idols that we have become enslaved to? Money? Power? Comfort? Sin? So rather than thinking literally of a nation we can identify as Egypt and instead we think in terms of metaphor ... perhaps we too can identify a similar experience in our own lives.

Mapleton Jan 4 2009

Similarly, though many scholars have tried to map out the 40 + years the Jews wandered in the wilderness ... is it really necessary to our faith? Does it matter where they wandered? Or does it matter more their experience in that wandering? That they turned their backs on God during that time creating a golden calf to worship. Or that they lacked faith in God's loving providence when they grumbled about the lack of food ... and then grumbled because the manna wasn't tasty enough? Or that they lacked faith in God's guidance by refusing to enter the Promised Land when they first encountered it ... scared off when they saw the armies of the residents of that land ... doubting in God to provide for them a safe home ... and thus sentencing all of them and their loved ones another 40 years of wandering?

Does it really matter where all this happened ... but rather that it happened? And if we think metaphorically can we identify in our own lives instances when we turned from God ... when our faith wavered and even faltered. Times when we trusted in our own judgement rather than listening to where God was leading us?

We can identify our own Egypts and our own wilderness experiences. But have we the courage to look forward ... on this first Sunday of 2009 ... to our own Promised Land. For if we look at Egypt and the wilderness metaphorically ... how

are we to see the Promised Land. We are told it is a Land of Milk and Honey ... meaning that it is a land where all our needs will be amply met. We are told it is a land of peace ... where we will know security and safety for God is protecting us. We are told it is a place of dignity and freedom ... we will no longer be burdened by bondage. Do we have the courage to find in the year ahead .. in our future ahead that Promised Land.

And this is the catch ... to enter that Promised Land means change. The Israelites would experience change ... they would enter the Promise Land under a new leader – Joshua. A man who was a very different leader than Moses. Not better ... but different.

Moses was a great leader – indeed the end of today passage confirms that --- not since Moses has Israel seen another leader like him ... one who encountered God face-to-face. One who had the abilities to lead a ragtag bunch of refugees and form them into a nation. Gift them with a law received from God that would guide them on the paths of righteousness. That is the leader who Moses was... yet he was not the leader for the Promised Land. That responsibility would fall to Joshua. Joshua was a man of action. Someone who would speak the truth whether or not it was acceptable. A warrior who would lead his people into battle ... but when appropriate could also show mercy and compassion. He was also something of an

administrator ... being able to establish a stable and effective government. Joshua was a different man than Moses ... but a man who was completely and abundantly gifted for the task ahead.

That is the lesson of this passage. That change is necessary. That skills and gifts that were useful in one circumstance sometimes have to be set aside when the circumstances change. We understand that for we see it at work in history. There is an old adage that says that the appropriate leader will rise in the appropriate time. The classic example of this is Sir Winston Churchill. He was a dynamic and charismatic Prime Minister of England during the Second World War. He gave speeches that inspired a besieged and beleaguered nations ... giving them the strength they needed to carry one ... ultimately to victory. Speeches that can still fire us with inspiration. Yet after the war he was largely ineffectual as Prime Minister. He was great at leading a nation in war ... but he was less than adequate for the mundane task of leading a nation at peace. His particular gifts were no longer needed. Perhaps Sir Winston was a Moses for his time ... and he was no longer needed when his nation entered the Promised Land of peace.

But just as the lands that are mentioned in this passage are given more relevance when interpreted metaphorically or symbolically ... so too is true for the men

mentioned. For Moses and Joshua were the leaders necessary for their particular times.

Moses had his time ... and he served truly and faithfully through it. But as the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land ... they had to leave that leader behind. Moses time had come ... and passed. And the Children of Israel had benefited and grown as a result of his leadership but now, in order to journey forward, they needed a new leader for a New Land.

As we stand on the brink of this New Year ... and if we have the courage to look forward to the future and see it as potentially our Promised Land ... then we too have to ask ourselves what we need to leave behind to journey forward. What are the Moses that we have to set aside so that we may journey forward ... equipped for the Promised Land? What are the gifts or traditions or practices that were suited to the past ... but need to be gracefully retired for the future. What patterns of power should we shed? What practices that may have relied on in the past to be beneficial may now in the future be detrimental?

These are all questions that I invite you to ponder. Ponder in your own lives, in the life of this congregation ... but also in the world. There is an old Chinese proverb that is both a curse and a blessing ... may you live in interesting times. Surely we

Mapleton Jan 4 2009

live in such times. But what we have to do in order that these interesting times become a blessing is to look with courage forward. Take stock of our traditions, our practices ... indeed our very way of being in this world. Take stock and be prepared to leave behind what is no longer needed. Value it for what it has provided in the past ... but honour it by having the courage to look beyond and boldly walk forth into the Promised Land that lay ahead.