

Mo Blessings Mo Problems Sermon Series  
Writing Your Obituary - Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
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I hope you're prepared. I hope you're focused and ready to listen. Fasten your seatbelts, because this is going to be the ultimate sermon on Moses.

I was talking to someone about this sermon series and I referred to last week's sermon as the penultimate sermon in this series, which sounds really remarkable, but actually only means that it's the next to last. That means the last of something is the ultimate, like the ultimate point in a journey. So today I will preach the ultimate sermon on Moses, a fact which either greatly impresses you, or makes you happy because it means it's finally the last one.

We've come a long way with Moses in these 10 sermons, haven't we? We started in the bulrushes of the Nile, where his mother put baby Moses to save him from Pharaoh's death sentence. Then, we stepped aside to witness his Burning Bush encounter with God. We marched with him to Egypt and heard him proclaim, "Let me people go!" to the Pharaoh. We saw him part the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk through from slavery to freedom. We smacked our foreheads in solidarity with him when the Israelites grumbled against God. We heard the 10 commandments proclaimed to the Israelites and grieved when not a week later they broke those commandments by fashioning a Golden Calf to worship instead of God. We stood with Moses as he caught a glimpse of God's glory and heard him encourage us to choose life over death by faithfully following God.

That brings us to today's reading, not only the last chapter in Deuteronomy, but the last chapter in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, which was essentially the Bible for the early Jews. But curiously, the Torah ends with some unfinished business.

In college I worked at the Courier-Journal newspaper in Louisville as a clerk, and one of my jobs on weekends was taking obituaries. I would sit at a computer for eight hours and do nothing but take information from funeral homes about dead people. It was like attending an eight-hour visitation every weekend. It was a pretty sobering job, not just because of the subject matter, but because I was reminded over and over again how a lifetime of experience could be boiled down into a paragraph.

I guess that's why today's passage sounds so familiar to me. It's essentially Moses' obituary. If I were typing it for the newspaper, it would read like this: Moses, age 120, died today in the land of Moab. Cause of death is unknown, but when you're 120, do you really need a reason? Moses was a former prince in Egypt, shepherd, and delivery man for the nation of Israel. He was a member of the Brothers of the Burning Bush and the Sea-Parters Club. He is survived by his wife, Zipporah; and adopted son, Joshua; and several hundred thousand followers. There will be no visitation and a private funeral, with burial to follow in an undisclosed location. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that you observe a 30-day mourning period.

Does anything bother you about the way Moses' life ends? It seems like ever since God came to him at the Burning Bush, Moses' singular purpose has been to get this cantankerous, argumentative bunch of Israelites to the Promised Land. And yet, now that they have finally arrived, just a stone's throw away, Moses is allowed to see the land but won't be allowed to cross the finish line. Something about this seems grossly unfair.

To understand why Moses isn't allowed into the Promised Land, we have to go back to a story in the book of Numbers. You won't be surprised to know our story starts with the Israelites

grumbling that they are thirsty, so God says to Moses, “Speak to that rock and water will come out.” But out of frustration, Moses has a bit of a mental breakdown. He says, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses strikes the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and everybody drank. But God said to Moses, “That’s not what I commanded you to do. Because you weren’t obedient to me, you will not be able to enter the Promised Land.”

Ok, fair enough. God asked Moses to speak to the rock, and instead Moses struck the rock...twice. We’ve all been there, right? We’ve all been the parent in the grocery store who raises her voice to her child after the 475<sup>th</sup> “Can I have this?”, or the driver who snaps at the person who cut them off in traffic. When I’m in a hurry but still have to walk the dogs, I’ve been known to growl at them, “Do your business faster!” We’ve all lost it for a second. It seems like a harsh punishment for Moses to bear, but as God’s appointed leader, Moses was held a higher standard, and he violated that in front of the people.

So that brings us back to the top of Mt. Nebo, where Moses gets an unprecedented view of the Promised Land. The geographical names don’t mean much to us now, but back then, it meant that Moses could see from horizon to horizon, from Paducah to Ashland, from Bowling Green to Covington. He gets to see the land that had been promised to his ancestors, but he doesn’t get to sink his toes into its fertile soil.

The year after Hurricane Katrina, I took a youth group down to the area to help with recovery efforts. Our assignment was to gut a house that hadn’t been touched since the hurricane. It was filled with water-soaked possessions, rotten food, and crumbling drywall, and we had to clean it out right down to the wooden studs. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a group work as hard as those kids did. We spent five days knee-deep in trash and debris, throwing away water-logged stuffed animals and ruined wedding albums, getting this house ready to be rebuilt for the family. On our last day, we were about an hour away from finishing, a half a room left to clear, when one of the adults said, “Kory, we have to go. Our flight leaves soon.” And I said, “No! We can’t leave! We’re this close to finishing.” But I knew she was right. So we packed up our tools and drove away, this close to the Promised Land of completely cleaning out the house.

I was so upset because I wanted to finish the job, I wanted to say that we completed what we started out to do. I don’t like to leave a job unfinished, a crossword puzzle uncompleted, a book with only a few pages left to read. If I do, it feels like I have failed. Well, if I apply that criteria to my daily life, then I fail every day, because every day there are things on my to-do list that don’t get done. Every night when I go to bed, I’ve left some unfinished business that I’ll have to carry over to the next day. Anyone else have that, too? If we define success and value our self-worth based on whether or not we finished the things we started, then we will never be successful or worthy.

But what if we change those definitions? After hearing all about Moses’ life, would you say he wasn’t successful? Of course he was! He accomplished amazing things in his life. He was faithful to God and served God’s people in such a way that he gets this glowing eulogy. So maybe success shouldn’t be the goal toward which we are striving. I wonder if we put so much stock in reaching a destination – getting the kids to college, landing the perfect job, making it to retirement, seeing a certain dollar amount in our savings – that we miss the joy of the journey. I wonder if we place our Promised Land as some destination out there to be reached, and miss the fact that our Promised Land is right here, right now, with all its challenges and frustrations and blessings. We can “wait until” our way right through our life and miss what God has for us right here, right now. Maybe this is our Promised Land, because God is here with us, in the midst of

the joy and pain and celebrations and challenges and the exciting and the mundane. God is here with us.

I believe Moses was content to die overlooking the Promised Land because he knew it wasn't his job to complete the journey. Moses fulfilled his mission, to lead the people, and now Joshua will take over and lead them into the land flowing with milk and honey. As he stood on that mountaintop looking ahead to the Promised Land, Moses could also look back at a life where he didn't wait for the something better to come along. He didn't say, "That burning bush is for someone else." He didn't say, "Pharaoh won't let the people go, at least I tried." He didn't say, "These people are driving me nuts!" OK, he did say that, but he didn't quit. He didn't say, "Wait until I get to the Promised Land." Moses had the vision to see not only the beauty of the destination, but the reward of the journey.

We will never do everything we want to do. We will never make it to the Promised Land we have constructed in our own minds. There will always be unfinished business in our lives. I'm sure the week after we left New Orleans, another group came in and finished the work we started. Does it matter who does the work? No, it only matters that it gets done. Was Moses successful? Depends on how you define it. But I know he was faithful, and somehow that seems more important. So, when we lay our heads down to sleep each night, we can trust that what we did was enough. We didn't do everything, but that's OK. It's not all up to us. Did we serve God by serving others? Did we honor God by extending love and grace? Did we speak God in the words of appreciation or encouragement? If we did, then I think we were successful. If we didn't, there's always tomorrow.

The Bible is a never-ending story. It doesn't end at the end of Deuteronomy and it doesn't end at the end of Revelation, either. Interestingly, both of those books end by describing what lies just ahead, the Promised Land, and the New Jerusalem, or kingdom of God. Both endings lead to new beginnings. In both cases, it is what follows that fulfills that vision, it's what's left unfinished that keeps the promise alive for the next generation. That promise is fulfilled for Deuteronomy by book of Joshua, as the Israelites entered the land promised to Abraham by God.

But wait, you say. There is no book after Revelation! What about the new Jerusalem? What happens next? How is the promise fulfilled? A professor of mine, Gerry Janzen, once said that the Bible is the first four acts of a five-act play. We are the fifth act. We are responsible for keeping the promise alive, for passing on to those who follow the wisdom we've gained, just like Moses did with Joshua. What will your obituary say? I hope it says something about knowing God face to face. I hope it says you enjoyed the journey and still had your vision. And I hope it says you left some unfinished business.