

“THE FUTURE WE CANNOT SEE”
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46
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At the northern edge of the Dead Sea, in what is now the country of Jordan, the Pisgah—or the highest cleft—of Mount Nebo rises 3,300 feet above the valley below. Looking north from the peak, on a clear day one can see the land spreading out ahead, mile upon mile. I find myself wondering what Moses was thinking as he looked out from the top of that mountain over the land below. For forty years, Moses had carried this people Israel: leading them out of Egypt, tending to their needs, establishing God’s law among them. Moses had overseen their transformation from slaves who were responsible, one by one, for seeing to the needs of their overlords, into a community of faith that followed where God led. Granted they did better some days than others, but still they became a community claimed its identity as the people of God.

Now the people had traveled a distance. They were camped, poised on the threshold of the land God had promised them. Moses took one more climb up one more mountain top: there to meet the God he had loved and served and argued with and called friend; there to look out over the land he would not enter, to cast his gaze on the place where his people would go on without him.

Moses must have been weary. How could he not be: 120 years old, having borne the weight of his responsibilities every single day for decades. I’m sure there must have been a part of him which rejoiced in throwing off the invisible cords that had bound him to leadership for so long. No more whining to listen to, no more murmuring, no more egos to salve or problems to solve or disobedience to check. No more.

And yet the work was left undone. The people had yet to enter into their promised land; they had yet to establish themselves as a settled people, wanderers no more. So much still to be accomplished. And Moses would not be a part of it. What if they screwed it up now? What if they strayed from all they had learned? What if? It is so hard to let go, to relinquish control, to let responsibility pass from your hands to someone else’s, hard because the future is full of “what ifs.”

Moses, I like to believe, Moses looked long over the land that was to be, over the future he could not and would not see, and then this great prophet, this great teacher, this great lover of God and leader of the people—he turned his back on it all and sighed as he was wont to do, and then, in both completion and incompleteness, he surrendered his spirit to God.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day we remember and celebrate in worship all of the saints who have worked at forming and reforming God’s church and God’s people throughout time. As we think together about the work of recreating the church across the generations, there is no place I would rather start than with this morning’s Hebrew Bible lesson: the story of the death of Moses.

I start here because there is a real poignancy in this scene: celebration, yes, but celebration mixed with sadness; mortality and immortality intertwined; greatness and limitation together. Over and over again

these mixed emotions characterize the story of God's people moving forward: the story of past giving way to future, reformation after reformation. We never get it right once and then it's done forever. The story of Moses is equally his story and the story of us in our time.

Reformation is good. It is the primary work of the church, reformation. The church must constantly reshape itself: understanding, proclaiming, and living the gospel differently in light of new circumstances and new information. There are in history reformations with a capital R—complete with famous names attached—but then there are the ordinary reshapings and refocusings of the church that occur with little or no fanfare. For example, I've been working with Judy Juntunen, our church historian, to put together some information about our church for its 125th birthday. Looking through a scrapbook, I found that in 1956, the then Federated church did a mission study and decided it would study and become more involved in the issue of racial injustice. A not unrisky move in 1956. The ordinary process of reformation for the church. Since those days, this church has participated in a number of mission studies and other discernment processes that refocused our understanding of the gospel and hence moved our ministries into other new territories: ministry with migrant workers, resettling refugees, becoming a Just Peace Church, becoming an Open and Affirming Church to name a few. Each commitment we have taken on as part of our identity has reshaped us; it has reformed us, and this work of small-r reformation has been carried out, is carried out and repeated in thousands of faithful congregations, and conference boards, and denominational settings throughout the churches throughout the world. Look at our partner church in Takarazuka, Japan: just in the time we have known them, they have taught us through their commitments both in Peshawar, Afghanistan and Okinawa.

As grateful as I am for the capital-R reformers who have brought great and significant change to the people of God over time—Moses, Jesus, Martin Luther and the rest—this Reformation Sunday, I want to celebrate the small-r reformers who in the midst of busy lives and careers still find the time and the passion and the commitment to love the church into becoming one small redefining act at a time. I celebrate the ones who sit through those sometimes—let's be honest here—sometimes deadly boring or frustrating or inconvenient committee meetings and then those exhausting congregational meetings that create change in the church one situation, one issue, one call for justice after another. You are a congregation of such people. In the past, you have formed and reformed this church, and reached out to new segments of God's people, and God willing, in the future, you will continue to do so. Every time you/we take a step forward, read the gospel in a new light for a new day, we are stepping into the great stream of reformers—capital R's and small r's alike—who have kept the church alive and vibrant over all these centuries and millennia. What a reason to give thanks.

And as I get older, one of the things I appreciate most about this great stream of reformers is that each single person, each generation carries the church only so far. For Moses the journey was from Egypt to Mount Nebo. He didn't have to find the skills and resources to lead the people into settled life and a settled economy and a system of government. Moses couldn't cross over into the Promised Land, not as a punishment, but because that wasn't his time, his place, his future to see and create. His job was only to get the community so far, to the brink of that future he could not see, and then let it go to do and become differently.

And this is where the poignancy of the story of the death of Moses comes in. Sometimes I think that not only reformation in the church, but much of life, is about finding or creating the things we love: our children, our institutions, our work. We find them; we invest ourselves fully in them; and then, having done all that, our job is to know when is the right moment to back away, to let go what we love and let it move on without us. From putting our child on the bus the first day of kindergarten to handing over the leadership of the church to those who can confidently see and move into a future we cannot discern, the pattern holds true. We love, we hold, we invest, we let go. And in that constant repeated act, there is always sadness and apprehension mixed with our joy. So many “what if’s” in the future we cannot see. So much work left undone.

But that is not our problem to solve. Our job is to joyfully and faithfully do the work that is ours to do: to be formers and reformers of the spheres of life given to us; to do and give our best in our time; and to know that, as in the past, other hands, other minds, other hearts will move on beyond what we can see. What a journey the people of God have come from the days of Moses! Sometimes more faithful than others, sometimes encountering greater problems than at others; but in each succeeding generation new voices have been raised up in concern and compassion, pointing the way towards insight and justice. It is the promise of our faith that God is with us: that even as the Divine Spirit traveled before the people Israel—a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night—God has still ever traveled the distance of history, and will be in the church and with the world far into the future we cannot see. So let us rejoice in the work that we have done, the work that is before us, and the work that is for others when we are done. Thanks be to God. Amen.