

“THE END OF AN ERA”
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46
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I spent the last year and a half of my first church in Duluth as Interim Senior Minister because the former Senior Minister had resigned for health reasons. This left me “in charge” at a time when the church was deciding whether or not to buy a new half million dollar pipe organ. I knew I would be leaving that church soon. This organ campaign was my last hurrah, my immortality project of sorts. If I did it right, there would be something concrete of my work left behind in the congregation. So I focused really, really hard on a congregational decision making model—music was a contentious issue in that congregation—and on the materials for the capital campaign: why an organ, why this particular organ, how it would be funded. The old organ was in sad shape. One of the great moral decisions of my life was when the wind chest in the basement blew on Easter morning sending an eerie moaning through the sanctuary whenever the organ was turned on. The organist and I looked at the wheezing wind chest. If we did nothing, the congregation—all the congregation—would see beyond a shadow of a doubt why we needed a new organ. He and I looked at each other for a long moment, then got out a roll of duct tape and went to work. No wheeze. Ethics won out over expediency!

Just as the congregation was about to begin my painstakingly-designed process, I received a call to my church in Seattle. I had to leave Duluth without seeing the project through. I was only 32 at the time, and it was my first real experience of the untidiness of life, of leaving one place for another without a sense of completion. Always before, it had been relatively clean. You finished high school and moved to college. You finished college and went on to a job or another degree, and yes, there were hard goodbyes, but it was orderly. No important work was left undone. Leaving the organ process behind felt huge to me. What if it didn’t work? What if my being there would have made the difference between whether it worked or not. In retrospect, of course, it doesn’t seem so big; at the time, it felt very wrong, incomplete, to leave this large project unfinished behind me.

In our scripture today, we are given the story of the death of Moses. Moses, who had led God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and carried them through four decades of desert wandering. Moses, to whom was given the promise of a new land the people would come to and settle in and be safe—no more wandering, no more uncertainty, the culmination of his life’s work. And Moses went up Mount Pisgah with God, and God showed him the length and breadth of the land that would be Israel. I try to imagine what Moses felt. This was the future towards which he had been working for 40 years, and he would not see it realized. Yes, there was the land spread out before him, but between seeing the land and actually inhabiting it, there was a huge gap. The people had to make the final leg of the journey. They had to occupy the land. Through a combination of military and political strategy, they had to find a way or ways to actually settle there, to build a system of governance, to develop agriculture and trade and, and, and... The list was long and important. And yet Moses would not be any part of it. He had brought the people this far, and for whatever God’s reasons, God decided that that was enough.

Maybe Moses, at 120 years of age, was ready to put down the burden of leadership he had carried for so long. Maybe he was weary. Maybe though he was the right leader for the Exodus from Egypt and to lead the desert wandering, he wasn't the leader for the pieces of the journey yet to come. For millennia, theologians have speculated about why Moses got to see the land and yet not go in, why this man so beloved of God did not get to bring his life's work to completion. The explanations offered all try to make sense of this poignant moment, to take the sting away, to assuage the sense of loss. But I can not help but believe that for Moses standing there, to come so close to the fulfillment of his life's work and yet not see it, it must have been brutal, heart rending.

For forty years, it had been Moses' responsibility to hold on to the people, to hold out the vision of the future before them, to live up to the people's, to God's trust in him. Now it is time for Moses to let go: to let go the leadership, to let go the responsibility, to let go what would have been his particular path for living into the vision of the future. Now, instead of the people trusting him, he had to trust his people, he had to trust his God to go forward without him, maybe not in the way he would have done it, but in a way still that fulfilled God's purposes and the people's destiny.

Stepping down, letting go, giving over the unfinished vision of the future into new leadership, different ways, other hands and hearts: what could be more difficult? And yet, what could be a more necessary lesson, both for Moses in his day, and for us in ours.

Granted: most of us do not have dreams or responsibilities as large as leading God's people from slavery to the promised land! But we do in our personal lives, in our work lives, in the lives of causes or institutions we care about, we all have visions for the future that sometimes should or must be let go, given into the care of others, or even abandoned. In the case of Moses, it was death that stood between him and the completion of his vision. And that was hard. But I believe it is harder most times to know, to accept when it is time to let go when letting go is a choice that we make, or at least a partial choice.

Those of us who are parents, we remember having babies and holding them tight in our arms to protect them against all in the world that would harm them. But babies grow up. As parents, we learn to step back from them. We game them first to babysitters just for a period of hours—with a two-page list of what to do and what not to do, and what the schedule is and who to call, and repeated assurances the sitter can call us every ten minutes if necessary. Then, all too soon, off they go—to school, to college, to life. If we are wise and good parents, we do an imperfect but loving job of letting them go, letting them live into not our vision of what their life should be, but their own—moving away, leaving our parenting job incomplete, but ...now we need to trust them in designing and living into their own becoming. And most of the time, they do it well. Most of the time, at least they will tell you, they will do a better job of managing their lives than we would do for them!

We all have institutions we love and commit to. The church is for most of us such a place. We who take leadership in the church, we build on the work of generations, of other leaders before us. That doesn't mean that we lead as they led, or that the church in our care looks like the church we are given. Good leadership, in the church, in the workplace, in other institutions

means beginning, maintaining, working hard towards a vision, and then being willing to step aside, to let other voices, other visions assume primacy, knowing that our greatest legacy to any institution we care about is raising up new leaders and then trusting them, really trusting them to continue the always unfinished business of moving and growing in new times and circumstances. Even if that's not the way it's always been done. Even if we would have done it differently.

At General Synod last summer, I talked with a woman who for ten years had volunteered in her church for an after school program for youth at risk that had been run out of the church basement. A year before, after a long, well-run but difficult process, the church decided to give up the youth program in order to house a free medical clinic for the neighborhood. I had such respect for this woman and her perspective. She was sad and disappointed that this program she had loved and poured her heart into for ten years was over. "But there are so many needs," she reflected to me. "I understand why the church chose the medical clinic, but it broke my heart. It's hard to let go of my dream in favor of someone else's dream. But if in the church we can't trust God and the Holy Spirit and each other to choose the best path forward, then we're not really a church, are we?" I wanted to give this woman an award, maybe a medal, partly for her decade of work in this outreach program she loved, but as much for her grace, her humility, and her faith in stepping back, trusting God, trusting her community to lead the church in a direction that turned out to be not what she would have chosen.

Unfinished business. Stepping aside so that new leadership might grow and thrive. What did Moses see, do you think, what did he dream, and what did he fear as he gazed down from Mount Pisgah and took in the land from Jericho to Gilead, from the Gallilean plain to the Western Sea? I like to think that he lay down his life in peace, knowing that his part of God's continuing work was well and faithfully finished. I like to think he looked back, glad for Joshua and the other leaders he had nurtured while he was in charge. I like to think Moses put down his responsibilities trusting that the God who was with him from the day he first beheld a burning bush on Mount Horeb, that God would raise up in every generation new leaders with both new strategies to meet new challenges and the wisdom to know when it was their turn to let go and let yet new leaders and a new day emerge. Since the day God laid him to rest, Exodus tells us, there has never been a leader like Moses. But there have been other prophets and leaders, great in their own ways. And there are all of us, who do our part, moving in and out of seasons of leadership, knowing that change is good and inevitable, and finished is not part of God's vocabulary, and only all too rarely part of ours. May we all, like Moses and like my friend from General Synod, find the grace and faith not only to be trustworthy in our time, but then to truly ourselves trust God, trust the community of God's people to move us always closer to the land of our dreaming, the place of God's shalom. Thanks be to God. Amen.