

A Dream That Didn't Come True Exodus 34:1-12

In the Bible we would like to believe that the stories of those who work for the Lord will have happy endings. Noah and his family escaped the flood and became the building block for all that was to come. Abraham not only started the journey of the people to the Promised Land, he got a son, Isaac, in the bargain. David succeeded beyond all imagination, both politically and personally.

But for the most part, success by God's chosen prophets and leaders did not end up with happy endings. Many of the prophets were reviled and beaten up because people didn't want to hear their messages of repentance. John the Baptist was beheaded because he had said something Herod and his wife didn't like. Early Christians were persecuted and killed because they dared to stand up for their faith.

But perhaps the saddest story of all is that Moses. Even with all his hard work, he didn't get to go into the Promised Land, he got to see it, but his feet never touched the land, he never got to breathe the air or eat of its fruit, and the irony of it all is that most commentators really don't know why.

In Numbers Chapter 20, Moses and the people were encamped at Meribah and as usual, the people were complaining about everything and God as usual, took care of them. To give them water, God told Moses to command the rock to produce the desired water. Instead Moses struck the rock with his staff, and this is the reason given for Moses' punishment. But this doesn't really make sense because there was Moses who endured so

much for so many years; he was faithful to God and in his care for the people. For something as inconsequential as this to ruin his dreams seems totally unfair. Scholars have come up with a variety of other explanations, but they all admit that there really is no good answer for what happened.

How Moses must have longed for the Promised Land during those awful years of wandering in the wilderness! All his life, all his work had pointed toward the eventual settlement of the people of Israel in the land that had been promised to them so long ago. He had taken this rag-tag bunch of slaves and made of them a warrior nation, ready for a land of their own. But he will never set foot in that land.

I might have understood if God had said an act of murder had resulted in this punishment, but I have never understood how striking the rock instead of speaking to it deserved such a harsh punishment. Somehow God concluded that Moses' action demonstrated that he did not trust God.

This scene to me is one of the most poignant in the entire Bible. I can't imagine the pain that Moses must have surely felt as he is granted only a glimpse of his life's goal, but not its fulfillment. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

While I am moved to pity and compassion for him, there is no description of Moses' psychological state at this moment. There seems to be no attempt by Moses to deal with the injustice of God's choice. He doesn't vent his disappointment by whining and complaining about the injustice of it all as the people had continually done on the journey. He does not try to bargain with God by saying that if he can just step foot on the land, he then can die a contented man. Somehow Moses seems to have

made peace with the knowledge that he will not enter the Promised Land.

When Moses finally is ready to listen to God's instruction to ascend the mountain, he takes one last opportunity to speak to his community, the Israelites, offering a rich and beautiful blessing for them. Some of Moses' best qualities shine through as he offers a very positive, hopeful prayer. Instead of using his last very last words to warn or inspire guilt, Moses extols both God and the Israelites, pointing out again the special relationship between them.

Then Moses quietly climbs the mountain. He must have felt some contentment that God's promise to the people is about to be fulfilled. The people have stopped complaining and are rejoicing in their future, a future that promises stability and happiness. But we know from reading the Bible that this dream too will not be what was expected. There will be many battles for the land, and generations will come and go before God brings peace and prosperity during David's leadership.

Though Moses is not permitted to enter the land, he is given an extraordinary vision of it. Moses looks as far as he can see and before him is the richness of the Promised Land. He has been obedient and has had faith for so long that it must have been a profound gift to have his hopes and convictions confirmed by what he did see.

Satisfied with what he has seen and with the knowledge that God will work in and through the people to bring them fulfillment, Moses quietly dies.

The Bible's final tribute to Moses in Deuteronomy 34:10 is remarkable: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." Not many lives are concluded with such epitaphs. While certainly agreeing with the Bible's assessment, the rabbis reflected that the final title attributed to Moses, that of prophet, wasn't enough, for he was in fact much more. He was a law-giver, a teacher, a philosopher, a general, a king, a sage, a high priest, and an interpreter.

In the end, Moses was satisfied with his life because he knew without doubt that God had been with him every step of the way.

We need to remember that God is with us on the journey. Remember what our text says about Moses – there was never another one like him. Consider all that God had done through him. Nobody ever knew the Lord face-to-face as had Moses.

The story of Moses is one about perseverance. Moses kept going forward even when the odds were against him. Moses remained faithful even though there were times when he wanted to quit.

It was the assurance of God's presence that kept Moses going. Jesus proclaimed that "the kingdom of God is in our midst." While we usually think of heaven as some far away place, Jesus reminds us that it can also be this very moment in time.

Moses had to be willing to let go of his dream of living in the Promised Land and be willing to pass it on to someone else. He wasn't called to be successful; he was called to be faithful.

A commentary by Kathryn Schifferdecker ends with this reflection: "One of the most striking uses of this text, of course, is

in the speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated. He addressed the crowd in Memphis:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people will get to the promised land.”

Mickey Anders in a sermon he preached just after Obama's election as president expounded on that point: “Just imagine how Martin Luther King would have celebrated this week's election of Barack Obama as the new President of the United States of America! It was the fulfillment of his dream – a nation where a man is judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin. Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech saw much of its fulfillment this week.

Whether we voted for Barack Obama or John McCain, whether we agree with his political policies or disagree with them, we all have to admit that we have witnessed a sea change in the area of race relations. Thousands of African-American parents have said, “Now when I tell my children that they can grow up to be anything they want to be, I can really believe it!”

If Martin Luther King was like Moses during the Civil Rights Movement, Barack Obama was Joshua. And just like the Joshua of the Bible, stepping into the Promised Land did not mean the

battles were over and the victory complete. In many ways, it was only the beginning, but it was an historic moment. Like Moses, Martin Luther King never got to see his dream fulfilled.

Dreams come in all shapes and sizes. Some are full of fantasy such as a girl hoping that there is indeed a perfect Prince Charming or a child who dreams of being the next Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. Other dreams can motivate us to work toward a goal; sometimes we reach that goal, other times we may not. Dreams are important if they don't rule our lives, they provide hope and something to work towards. But they can also bring about feelings of frustration, anger and bitterness depending on what the outcome is.

This certainly could have been the case with Moses. Yet Moses for all of the pain he must have been feeling, knew that what mattered most was believing and following God, no matter where that would take him. Let us take that example and hold it in our hearts. Because God will never desert us; the Lord will always be near guiding and supporting us.
