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The Twenty-Second Sunday of Pentecost

Deuteronomy 34

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Four weeks after my ordination as a deacon in Pittsburgh I knocked on the door of a family who were mourning the loss of their father. This was to be the second funeral I'd ever taken. I'd come to express sympathy, learn about the deceased, and plan the service. A 20-year-old man answered the door. The moment he saw my clerical collar he said, 'Most people, when they have a heart attack, they get a second chance. But my dad just dropped dead at 53 – so there isn't a God then, is there.' I looked into his eyes as unflinchingly as I could. I said, simply, 'I'm so, so sorry. Can we talk about it?' Two weeks after the funeral several youth in the neighborhood were arrested after vandalizing the town's high school. The young man who I had spoken with was one of those taken in. Among other things, I took this to mean that my answer to his question didn't satisfy.

I want to stay with those words, 'I'm sorry. Can we talk about it?' I want to look together at the final chapter of Deuteronomy, at the very end of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Because there we find a similar sense of dismay, injustice, bewilderment; a feeling that things just didn't work out as they were supposed to. I want to read this passage first through the eyes of Israel, and then as a message for us today.

Let's begin with Israel. Imagine Israel recording this story, gathering it into what we know as the Old Testament, and cherishing it as part of its scriptures. This is a passage full of paradox. On the one hand it's a perfect conclusion: all is completed, Israel has been liberated from Egypt by crossing the Red Sea, the law has been received on Mt. Sinai, and from this second mountain top the land lies beckoning to be claimed and conquered and controlled. Everything promised long ago to Abraham is now about to be inherited once and for all by Moses.

But it turns out it's not perfect. It ends on a sour note. Israel's great leader isn't going to march at the head of the entering nation at its most triumphal and glorious moment. Moses dies; he dies on the very threshold, tantalizingly and excruciatingly. That's just not fair. The narrative is full of the glories of Moses. Moses was unique because he saw God face-to-face, and because he did, great signs and wonders. His mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power were unrivaled by anyone before or since. But he doesn't get to climb up the victors' steps and lift the trophy. Not only that, he wasn't even ill: he was only 120 years old, which makes

you a spring chicken by early Old Testament standards. We're told "his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated," so he was practically in his first flush, notwithstanding the massive grey beard he has in all the paintings. As my bereaved young in Pittsburgh might say "So there isn't a God then, is there."

What sense can we make of this? The story gives us a few options. Sometimes it seems to put the blame at the feet of the murmuring Israelites who didn't trust in the manna, set up a golden calf while Moses was with God, and kept grumbling in the wilderness for 40 years – so Moses takes the rap for their unfaithfulness. In other places the story blames Moses himself for failing to maintain God's holiness among the people. Whenever our life goes wrong, there are always people eager to make instant sense of it. Some say "You brought it on yourself by your lifestyle or character or mistakes." Some say "It was meant to be – it was written in the stars." Some say "You were robbed and you should demand your money back." Others, almost regardless of circumstance, insist on saying "I'm sure it's for the best and one day we'll discover why."

The point here is, the fact that Moses never makes it to the Promised Land becomes a symbol later in Israel's memory for the way no one has any entitlement, there's never a time you can say you have a right to something, everything remains gift and never becomes possession. It's not fair, and the attempted explanations aren't adequate. It doesn't make sense. Somehow salvation, in the sense of a permanent place in God's heart represented by flourishing in the Promised Land, always remains just out of reach.

And that brings us to how the story reads today. Much as we'd like to deny it, a lot of us carry inside a sense of entitlement and a corresponding feeling of dismay and bewilderment when our story doesn't turn out as we always assumed and expected.

- "We were looking forward to a good few years of retirement together, with travel and grandchildren and the garden, but COVID happened, and then long COVID happened, and nothing worth mentioning has much happened since."

- "I didn't worry too much about being made redundant because I never doubted that I'd quickly get another job. But I didn't. And now my experience is becoming dated, and I'm not even getting interviews, and I wonder if I'll ever work again."

- “I thought, ‘I’ll go to college, I’ll work for a few years and then I’ll settle down with someone and have a family.’ But I’ve never met that someone. And I’m still in the same job. I never thought my work would be the big thing in my life. I don’t really care that much about my job. But it’s getting past the point where I think I might ever have a family.”

- “I thought he was the one. We met and my black and white world exploded into technicolor. My friends had their doubts about him, but I brushed it off, and doubled down on my own willpower. We were in love. And now I haven’t just lost him, I’ve lost my own belief in love.”

- “Since the accident my sister’s behavior has got more and more erratic. With my parents having died, I’m the primary carer. I want to get on with living, see the world, settle down, but I can never predict what’s going to happen next. It’s like my whole life is waiting for a phone call to tell me I’ve got to collect my sister from the hospital.”

- “I worked so hard to get that place into shape. I used to joke that I’d stay until I was sure my successor couldn’t ruin it. But the joke’s on me. My successor sure has ruined it. It feels like my life’s work is in tatters.”

Here’s the bad news: almost nobody’s life turns out as it was supposed to. Our lives aren’t lumps of marble that we spend three score years and ten crafting into a magnificent statue to our own glory. Here’s the good news: our lives are clay that the Holy Spirit molds and remakes into a vessel for the blessing of others; they’re stones that the fragile hands of Jesus build into a living temple for the singing of God’s praise. We don’t get to write the last chapter in our own eulogy. We get to play some notes that we trust that Jesus will write into an eternal symphony and the Holy Spirit will conduct into the harmony of an everlasting orchestra.

One night in Memphis, Tennessee, speaking on behalf of the town’s sanitation workers, a young Martin Luther King talked of how after a near-fatal stabbing in 1960 he was glad his life had been spared because in the ensuing eight years he’d lived to see the almost unstoppable progress of the Civil Rights movement in America. With a premonition of what was to come, he said: “It really 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! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Those were his last words. The following day at the age of 39 he was assassinated outside his motel room. Things hadn't worked out as planned. But Martin Luther King had read Deuteronomy 34. He'd been to the mountain top. Like Moses, it turned out he wouldn't get to the Promised Land himself. It seems so unjust. There's a bunch of explanations but none of them will do. Like Moses, King didn't live for completion or a memorial. He was part of a people, and that people was in covenant with God, and in that covenant, individual fulfillment wasn't ultimate.

Our challenge is to be the same. Alone and isolated, none of our lives make any sense. My life only becomes meaningful when I'm part of a people who are in a covenant with a God who makes beauty out of clay and builds a temple out of stray stones. If we're looking for personal fulfillment, a fitting memorial, an individual legacy, we're looking for the wrong thing.

We have a word for what it means to set aside the construction of our own perfect story and allowing ourselves to be included in God's unfolding story. We have a word for the moment we set aside our certainty that we know what meaning and purpose and truth mean, and when we allow our meaning and truth and purpose to emerge in the course of a covenant that God shares with a people. We have a word for losing your life and rediscovering it in the resurrected life of Christ's body. And that word is "baptism." In baptism we lose the ability to define our story and welcome the gift of the story in which God graciously includes us.

I want to go back to that funeral visit ten years ago. Of course, what I needed to do was listen to that bereaved young man in his grief. But inside I want to say to him, "I'm sorry about your dad. You're going to miss him terribly. But life isn't about longevity or achievement or completion or even, in the end, fairness. I want you to live a life like Moses, who was the greatest-ever founder of a nation, who went to the mountain top but never got to Canaan. I want you to live a life like Martin Luther King, who went to the

mountain top, and like Jesus, laid down his life that his people might enter the Promised Land. I want you to think about living a life that ends with your saying these words: 'It really doesn't matter now, because I've been to the mountaintop. I'd like to live a long life. 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.' If you live that kind of life, then when you die, albeit tragically, sadly, cruelly, your son might say, proudly, honestly, gently, 'So there is a God then, isn't there.'"

