

## **“THE HOPE & PROMISE OF REFORMATION”**

Sermon Preached by the Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture References: Deuteronomy 34:1-12 & Revelation 21:1-6a

Poor Moses. That’s what we tend to think, isn’t it? Moses had lived to the wise old age of 120. As a babe, he had survived the killing of all the young Hebrew males of his age. As a child, he lived as a refugee in Pharaoh’s palace knowing he was different, knowing he was a special case, a Hebrew among the Egyptians. Headstrong and full of youthful zeal, he killed a man when he witnessed injustice. He then fled and became a stranger in a foreign land. From there, God called him before a burning bush and revealed a divine plan. Over the course of his life, Moses had been a slave, a prophet, a leader of people, a preacher, a brother, a minister, a healer, and no doubt a few other things too. From our contemporary perspective, where second careers and encores are the norm, we can see Moses the over-achiever, the life-long learner, the tireless and also exhausting leader who always kept a few irons in the fire. Moses had led his people to freedom and wandered with them lost in the wilderness for 40 years. He had served his people faithfully: bringing nothing less to them than the word of God Almighty from a mountaintop place. Throughout his life, he ministered to his people. He blessed their children and helped bury their dead. He presided over the everyday occasions of life—comforting the grieving, celebrating small triumphs, helping to heal the sick, praying for all of them. Scripture tells us that he was “unequaled for all the signs and wonders” he performed. Neither before nor ever since has there arisen a prophet like Moses. And for a career as storied as his, what’s his reward? Death. For all of his service, Moses dies with no hope of entering the Promised Land. Where’s the promise in that?

A few chapters before the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy that we heard today, God tells Moses why. Chapter 32, verse 50, the LORD said to Moses “you shall die on a mountain, as your brother died on a mountain, because both of you broke faith with me.” God makes this reason clear, but still I wonder what is one transgression amidst a lifetime of good? Also, I’ve got brothers and I know that when one of us got in trouble (never me), usually we all got punished. So I know this sort of proclamation that begins “you and your brother both...” But what I’d say to my mom then, I want to say to God on behalf of Moses now: you don’t understand, what’s Aaron got to do with it, and where’s the forgiveness? Where’s the assurance of pardon, the passing of the peace, the comfort of God who forgives and is forgiving? It’s hard for us not to hear the story of Moses from the human side and from the many faithless moments in our own lives. If Moses, Moses who knew God “face to face” couldn’t enter the Promised Land, what hope do I have? I don’t stand a chance.

God’s preferred meeting place with Moses is on mountaintops. It is on Mount Horeb where God first appears, telling Moses to take off his shoes for he stands on holy ground. It is on Mount Sinai where God meets Moses to give him the law and the covenant. And it is today that we arrive on Mount Nebo where Moses will die at God’s command. After his death, his body will be taken down and buried in a valley in the land of Moab. Throughout his life, Moses climbs mountains to meet God. In death, he is returned to the ground where his people mourn for 30 days on the plains. Such are the ups and downs of an extraordinary life.

Just before he dies, Moses has one final visit with his God, who after so many years was no doubt also his friend, his companion, his ever-present help in times of struggle. Among all the visions and conversations, among all the divine words and mighty deeds revealed over a lifetime of revelation, it is this last conversation that is my favorite. Of all the meetings and all the mountains, this one is something extra special. Let your minds wander for a moment, and come with me up to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. The sky is a brilliant late afternoon blue. The sun sits low casting long golden glimmers across the land and the Spirit of God hovers on the wind. It's what some photographers call "magic hour," the extra-ordinary moment when the way the light meets the land casts diamonds in your eyes. Moses, whose eyesight was perfect, stands with all the vigor of his youth and surveys this wondrous sight. In that moment, the LORD revealed the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, the valley of Jericho, and the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. "All of this," says God, "is what I promised. Look, Moses, look. All of this is the hope I have for my people." That's what I call a vision.

Pulpits are a bit like mountaintops. From up here, men and women—pastors, preachers, students, even a lawyer or two on occasion—have looked out and tried to tell us what they see. Together, we try to see the vision of God for God's people and for the world as far as we can see it. From up here old men have had dreams, young men have seen visions, daughters have prophesized, and God dwells among us. If you've never stood up here and looked out, you should. This is your pulpit, First Church, and I wish you could see how good you look from up here. After worship, after the postlude, come up—come climb these narrow steps take a turn looking out on the church. I'm not kidding; this is a real invitation. Ask yourself what vision you have and take in the sight. Seriously, try it. Actually, there's no more fitting Sunday for you to get in this pulpit than today, today when we remember the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of the start of the Reformation.

Earlier this week I mentioned that I was preaching this Sunday to a friend of mine. He asked what I was going to talk about, and I told him I was thinking about Moses and Joshua, trying to fit in Martin Luther and of course Jesus and that I hadn't quite figured out how it was all going to come together yet. His suggestion was that I remind you of our reformation heritage, that we are a priesthood of all believers, and that perhaps I should just instruct you to turn to your neighbor, your fellow priest, and sermon yourselves. Like that old "Coffee Talk" skit on Saturday Night Live, I might just come up here and say "Talk amongst yourselves. I'll give you a topic: the reformation is either reformed or reforming. Discuss." I gave him a much longer explanation of polity than I'll trouble you with, but suffice it to say that's not what we're doing today. But on the other hand, it's an interesting idea for another day. Pedagogically, I prefer the seminar to the lecture but a sermon, this moment that we get to spend together, is something else entirely.

Martin Luther believed that the word of God lives and should live among the people. We share this belief: there's a Bible in every pew rack. He also believed that faith alone—*sola fide*—was the hope of salvation. This was in contrast to the works of theology, the sale of indulgences, and the very notion of purgatory that he viewed as the teaching of a human church needing reform rather than holy scripture—*sola scriptura*—which stands eternally pure. Martin Luther didn't set out to start a new religion—neither did Jesus for that matter—but to re-form the human church around what he viewed as a heavenly vision.

Martin Luther looked out from his pulpit, looked up from his desk, and saw the hope and the promise of what a re-formed church could be. We continue this work every Sunday when someone climbs the steps to this pulpit and thinks with all of us about how we might be reformed. Today, the responsibility fell on me; most frequently it is Jon; often it is Barbara or Mark, and over time there will be more whom we don't even yet know. Throughout the fullness of time, God calls faithful women and men to serve God's people and for all of us to tell a little bit more of what we see as we look to the vision of God that covers all the land, that goes as far to the western sea, that includes cities and valleys, mountains and plains. Together, we are the church reformed and reforming.

From that mountaintop where he stood with God, Moses saw a vision of how his people would be reformed in a new land. True, he wouldn't be joining them there, but he could see it. He could see the promise for his people and he could see the fulfillment of hopes and dreams they might have been too scared or too beaten down or too busy to have noticed themselves. Moses had brought his people as far as he could go, and it is from right there in the human moment of his final mountaintop, that he sees abundance upon abundance. Not for himself, mind you, but for his people, and his people's children, their children's children, and indeed for all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom God had made a promise of reformation so many years ago.

Some of you may recall the novel by Kathryn Stockett or the film of the same name called *The Help*. It's the story of African-American women working as maids in white households in the deep south of 1963. The film begins with the character Aibileen beginning to tell her story to an off-camera white reporter. At 53 years old, she tells that she was born in 1911 on Piedmont Plantation in Cherokee County. She says she always knew that she would be a maid because her momma was a maid and her grandmother was a house slave. The reporter asks if she ever dreamt of being something else, but Aibileen doesn't answer, the room falls quiet, fade to black.

Scene two: morning in the white household where Aibileen works. We hear her voice over the images of her morning routine: "I done raised seventeen kids in my life. Lookin' after white babies, that's what I do...I work from eight to four, six days a week. Ninety-five cents an hour comes to a hundred seventy-two dollars ever month. I do all the cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and grocery shopping, but mostly, I take care a baby girl." At this moment, the camera shows us Aibileen getting young Mae Mobley out of her crib and saying good morning to the child. Two and a half year old white Mae sits on the lap of 53-year-old black Aibileen as the elder rehearses what we can only imagine to be the daily chorus of "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." The child repeats each mantra as her hands reach for and touch Aibileen's face.

Aibileen's own children are grown, and she's not likely to have any more. What she has, though, is a vision for how far Mae Mobley might go. Aibileen sees a promise in that one child who might just re-form the whole world. Aibileen, like Moses, would go as far as she could go—and there is indeed promise for her in the story—and yet she would still look farther; she would look beyond herself. I think of how teachers must see the potential of each of their students. I think of how doctors envision the restored health and vitality of their patients. I think of how all whom work in the caring professions—social workers, nurses, therapists, home health aides and workers—see with compassion. I think of how artists begin with a blank page, canvas, or stage and show us how the world could look. I think of what I see, and the vision of

each of my colleagues, teachers and friends who have stood here and looked, daring to think with all of us about the hope and promise of reformation.

Martin Luther wrote out 95 theses—95 ideas or visions for how the church might look as he looked out. This was a beginning, not an ending, and the real work of re-forming came next, took longer, and was no doubt harder. It came with costs—Father Martin Luther was excommunicated and lost his monastic way of life. True, he reformed himself as a married man with a boisterous household, but let's not discredit the loss he must have felt in those initial moments, or the wounds he probably carried.

Aibileen raised 17 children—17 young citizens of a new generation. She wasn't raising them to do as she did, or to live as she had lived; she raised them to lead us forward in the work of re-forming that still needs realizing. Her vision came with costs too. She wasn't home with her own children each day from 8am to 4pm. She had no time for rest, and it's hard to count the number of small indignities and more blatant hate she no doubt suffered each and every day.

Moses led a whole nation out of a land of slavery and through a wilderness time that lasted more than a generation. Some scholars talk about the wilderness being a necessary time for letting go of old ways of being to learn new ways of living. At times it got so rough out there for Moses that the people suggested they go back to Egypt, that slavery was better than the hardship of freedom or the struggles of reforming. Let's not forget the everyday obstacles Moses endured as he kept the vision he saw way back at the beginning of the story when he stood on a mountain talking to a burning bush and heard God's command to liberate God's people.

These sorts of reformation visions are at the very crux of our faith, and our lives, today. How are we reforming ourselves, our church, and our world to be more in line with the vision we might see when we look out from lofty places with God? What might we leave behind, and how long will we mourn when God calls us to reform ourselves? For every time, there is a season and a purpose for everything under heaven. But let us not get stuck under the weight of what is passed as we look to the work of re-forming ahead. There is justice to be done. There are new leaders to be called. There is hope to be shared, and promises to be made that tomorrow will be better than today, or we're going to die trying.

True, Moses didn't enter the Promised Land. He led his people as far as was humanely possible, and God granted him rest. Softly and tenderly, on that final mountaintop, God called Moses to come home, come home. Not all work can be done in a single lifetime, nor can one leader—no matter how great, how beloved, how visionary—take us to all places. In the work of reforming, there is always a need for more and new and more diverse voices. As new leaders with new vision rise up for new challenges, what hopes do we share for where we may go and how far we may be led? Reformed and always reforming. The promise of reformation is nothing short of a new heaven and a new earth, which we hope to see with our own eyes. We walk by faith, we rely on grace, we trust in God. Reformed, and always reforming.