

## UNMARKED MEMORIES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

Sermon preached by Robert E. Dunham

May 27, 2018

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

In his moving valedictory sermon in this pulpit six weeks ago, Jon Walton spoke of Moses, standing on Mt. Nebo, at the end of the decades-long Exodus sojourn through the wilderness, gazing into the Promised Land, knowing that he would not be entering the Land with the people. It is a poignant scene, full of pathos, yet full of hope and the fulfillment of promise. My guess is that there weren't many dry eyes on the plains of Moab, any more than there were dry eyes in this sanctuary on April 15.

God shows Moses the whole land, and then says, "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." But today, it is to the next verses in that story that I want to call our attention – verses that may sound a bit odd to our Twenty-first Century ears. The Deuteronomist says:

<sup>5</sup> And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. <sup>6</sup> [God] buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Bethpeor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. <sup>7</sup> Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. <sup>8</sup> The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

We will return to that story in a few moments. But there is another story, more recent. I half-heard the news report, so I missed some of the details. I think the reporter said Galveston, Texas, but I'm not sure, and it wasn't a critical detail anyway. The report said that police had been called to an elementary school because construction workers working on a site renovation had found what they thought was a pipe bomb. It is a sad sign of our times that pipe bombs show up at schools, but they do, and police were called.

Officers had arrived and, after studying the cylindrical container for a while, determined that it quite possibly was a pipe bomb, and so the bomb squad was called, and the decision was made to detonate the device. The school children were moved away from the area to a safer place. A detonator was attached and triggered, but to everyone's relief there was no great explosion ... only a small puff of dust and smoke.

What the police discovered, when they examined the remains of the cylinder, was that they had apparently detonated a time capsule, buried by school children in 1956, about which the school had no records. The report concluded at that point, but my mind tried to imagine what they might have put into that cylinder 62 years ago. I could imagine the tattered remains of an "I Like Ike" button, or maybe a newspaper account of Don Larsen's perfect game in the World Series against the Brooklyn Dodgers (ironically, the Tony for best musical that year went to "Damn Yankees"); or perhaps the time

capsule had a poster from the Academy Awards' Best Picture that year – “Around the World in Eighty Days.”

Whatever it was, it was a bit of history, blown to smithereens in Texas at the hands of the local bomb squad. Of course, when we truly lose our sense of history, it is no laughing matter. We lose our sense of rootedness, our sense of identity. We forget who we are and whence we've come and the lessons we've learned along the way. You don't need me to tell you how important our history is, and why our forgetfulness has placed us in peril in these latter days.

But there's an opposite danger, too. Sometimes history can be an impediment to our embrace of the time at hand. Sometimes we can get so stuck in a past that was challenging and invigorating and wonderful somehow, or so attached to a person who helped shape and form us into who we have become, that we are handicapped and disabled for the challenges at hand in our own time. It may seem an odd concern to raise in a church as vital and alive as this church, but my experience tells me that one of the hardest times for any church to look forward is in the weeks and months right after a beloved pastor has departed. We need space to grieve in such days – to cherish memories. And eventually, we will need to turn from looking back to facing forward. The grief is important work, and so, then, is the turn toward the road ahead.

It may seem on the surface like a small textual detail, but I wonder if some such rhythm wasn't behind God's burial of Moses in an unmarked grave in that passage we just read. This scene from the end of Deuteronomy is a moment of heart-wrenching sadness, on the one hand, but it is also a tender and touching moment. After forty years of wandering with the Hebrew people in the wilderness, Moses is allowed only to catch a glimpse of the Promised Land. Then he died. Most translations say that he died “at God's command,” or “as God had said,” but the Hebrew more literally means, he died “at God's mouth.” Hebrew midrash suggests that it means Moses died at a kiss from God.<sup>1</sup> And the Hebrew is interesting at another point, too. A literal reading of the Hebrew at verse 6 says, “God buried Moses in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.” Most translators can't handle it. Even our NRSV says simply, “He was buried...” So far as I know, only the NIV and the Common English Bible get it right: “God buried Moses....” God buried his old friend, whom he knew face-to-face.

God knew that Moses' work was done. God knew what lay ahead for the children of Israel: a land flowing with milk and honey, perhaps, but also a land flowing with sweat and tears. God knew the Israelites' tendency to seek security in what lay behind them. Perhaps God knew the people might even set up a shrine to Moses and keep returning. But God also knew that they needed to turn their faces toward the challenges before them. And so, the grave where God buried his old friend was left unmarked. And the people mourned for thirty days, but then moved on, accompanied by their memories of

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Clayton cited Jeffrey Togay's Jewish Publication Society's commentary on Deuteronomy, in a paper presented to the January 2011 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Austin, Texas.

Moses and by the new leadership of Joshua, and even more importantly by the Torah that God had given them through Moses.

There are in the lives of all of us remarkable people, moments, events that have shaped and transformed us. There will always be a tendency to want to hold onto them, to frame them in our minds as somehow larger than life, to keep coming back to them. But as soon as we enshrine such memories, they lose something of their power for good.

It is only when we see them as part of an ongoing story that now includes us and others yet to come that such memories give us vitality for the road ahead. I think of the sign that graces the entrance to Winchester Cathedral in England, which says. “You are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead.”<sup>2</sup> It is not only a conversation; it is a journey. The journey of faith on which we are embarked, you and I, is a journey that began long before we were born; our feet were set upon it by others who preceded us in faith; the journey has taken us through some moments of great importance and has brought us into contact with some people of lasting influence. But we honor those events, those moments and those people best by embracing the journey for ourselves, and moving on to the challenges that await us, buoyed by good and gracious memories and by the steadying presence of their accompaniment.

Moses is dead. His memory lives. And though the people grieve his loss, they move on. In a less dramatic way, but locally just as important, Jon has moved on. His memory still stirs this church and will for years to come, as it should. But he has entrusted the work now to you; now it is your task – *our* task together – to encourage and support those whom God is raising up in our time as leaders for this congregation. That task – the encouragement of one another and the attendant strengthening of the body – is a vital part of our stewardship of the ministry that God has entrusted to us, of our stewardship of the church. Jana Childers, professor and dean at San Francisco Seminary, tells a story that offers a metaphor for such equipping of the saints:

A number of years ago at a traditional African-American Good Friday service at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, I saw something precious pass from one generation to the next. In a lovely turn-about, the men of the congregation were providing the special music while the seven last words of Christ were being preached by seven women preachers. (“Women were last at the cross and first at the tomb,” Allen Temple’s pastor Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr. says, “when it comes to Easter we ought to let them preach!”) The men . . . were clearly getting a kick out of it. I was, too, especially since my favorite baritone was scheduled to sing “The Holy City” right after my sermon. I barely managed not to swoon each year when Deacon Sellers sang, and this year I was only grateful I didn’t have to follow his song. Of course, there are not seven male soloists the quality of Deacon Sellers, even at a mighty 4,000-member church like Allen Temple, and so some young baritones-in-training were being given their first outing at this service. I remember

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Will Willimon for calling attention to this sign in a sermon preached at Duke Chapel on August 19, 2001.

one young man who seemed to be twelve or thirteen years old, who trembled his way through the first few bars of the assigned song and who was a good two blocks [south of] the key the organist was in. The congregation was with him, though. “All right now,” I heard. “That’s right.” “Sing, child.” And gradually, I noticed a strengthening, then a course correction. The young voice was encouraged by the congregation’s support – but there was more. The young voice was being shadowed, it seemed to me, by a steady, stealthy voice. I looked around. There in the mostly empty choir loft a few feet behind the soloist, sat Deacon Sellers, his eyes and face averted. He just happened to be there, you know – waiting his turn. I looked again. He was singing. Quietly, steadily, surreptitiously singing that green twelve-year-old into key. Gradually, I realized there were five or six other men scattered through the loft, also looking very casual. Also softly, but firmly singing [and helping that young baritone find his way].

There are lots of ways to help the next generation find its voice, [Childers said, but none] more important... than lending our own. [Once again, I was reminded to give thanks] for what the great Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney called “the balcony people” – all those who have raised up, championed and cheered on the young – all those who [helped] set their feet on the path of faith – all those who got them this far. May their tribe increase.<sup>3</sup>

Moses is dead. New leaders will arise, and they need our encouragement and our support. Not all of us are able to sing someone back into key, but we each have a part to play. And these transitional days may well be a perfect time for us to ask if we are doing all we can to prepare the next generation for faithfulness to God and neighbor in the changing landscape of church and ministry all around us.<sup>4</sup> There is a tendency to frustration, as we survey that landscape, for sometimes it is hard to perceive the progress we so long to see. I’m sure Moses felt that way. But as the late Catholic bishop Ken Untener once said so well:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.  
Nothing we do is complete,  
which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

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<sup>3</sup> Jana Childers, “Benedictory,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2009, with thanks to Carla Pratt Keyes, who included the story in her sermon of October 16, 2011 at the Ginter Park Presbyterian Church of Richmond.

<sup>4</sup> Clayton, cf. note 1.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
 No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This [then] is what we are about:  
 We plant seeds that one day will grow.  
 We water seeds already planted, knowing they hold future promise.  
 We lay foundations that will need further development.  
 We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,  
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
 This enables us to do *something*,  
 and to do it very well.  
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity  
 for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,  
 but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.  
 We are workers, not master builders....  
 We are prophets of a future not our own.<sup>5</sup>

Moses died. God buried him. We don't know where. But this much we know: the journey of hope on which Moses and the Hebrew children set out all those centuries ago stretches out before us still. There are new leaders to encourage, there are children to teach, and there are people who need us to stand with them in the fight against oppression and the struggle for justice and equity and fairness. Think of them, won't you, when you say your prayers tonight. Think of them during this summer ahead when you consider where you will commit yourself to the life of this church. Think of them when you consider the gifts you've been given to share as we join hands and hearts with one another and lean into the future together. God has brought and is bringing such people to you in these days. They are counting on you. So, please... think of them as you set your feet to the road ahead.

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<sup>5</sup> Ken Untener, Catholic bishop, wrote these words, even though they somehow became known as the Prayer of Oscar Romero, archbishop of El Salvador. Romero never actually spoke the prayer. Cf. [http://bogners.typepad.com/church/2004/03/the\\_prayer\\_of\\_o.html](http://bogners.typepad.com/church/2004/03/the_prayer_of_o.html). I am grateful to Kim Clayton for sharing this citation with the Moveable Feast.