

Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

If you think back over the Old Testament readings of the last several weeks, you may remember that we have been working our way through the story of Moses leading the Israelites from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. In the last few weeks we have heard of Moses interceding for the Israelites after they break God's law by worshipping a golden calf. And then last week Moses was given the gift of seeing God, or at least, seeing God's back after God passed by him.

But I had not been expecting to find myself suddenly at what seems to be the end. I hadn't in my mind been prepared to find myself this week facing the death of Moses.

I don't often think about the death of Moses, but when I do, it often makes me sad. Moses worked and struggled with the people of Israel, and he spoke to them about the Promised Land, which all their struggles and hardship were preparing them for. And Moses, one of only a few Israelites who lived all the way from the exodus from Egypt to arriving at the border of Canaan 40 years later, Moses is told by God, "No – you will not enter the promised land".

I have often thought of this as a punishment. The explanation we find in the Bible is that Moses lost his temper once with the children of Israel, and did not give God enough glory during that miracle when he struck the rock and water poured out to save the Israelites when they were dying of thirst. And so, despite all the good work Moses did, this one failure keeps him out of the paradise of Canaan.

But I don't think that is the only thing happening in this story. Even if Moses' anger in the desert is part of the reason he does not enter the Promised Land, I think there is a larger lesson in this story for all humans to hear. The story of Moses tells us the story of every one of us – that we are mortal – that we will die, before every task or project that we have been part of is completed.

We each give ourselves to the work God sets before us – to love, and work, and care for one another to the glory of God. To serve our Lord in ministry to Him and to His people. But we will not see every fruit of our labor, or the completion of every project we have worked on. Truly, while we are still alive we do not learn the end of every story in which we have played a part.

And so we hear that Moses, who was blessed with health and with 120 years of life, Moses, like every human, laid his life down at the end, and Joshua, whom Moses had loved and taught and mentored, continued on in the work that God and Moses had begun.

And then I think that truly, Moses was quite blessed that the Lord led him up Mount Nebo and he was able to see all the beautiful land that he had been looking for and promising for his people those 40 long years. And Moses was blessed to know that his people made it – and though they still had a lot of work to do to go into that country and win a place for themselves there – they had made it there. They had arrived at the land of promise.

Each of us is given work from God for us to give our lives to. We are given big jobs and small jobs – working and caring, and leading the way to blessings God has promised for each one of us. And in our lives we may be blessed to see the success of many of our efforts – the fruits of our labor. We may see children taught, communities helped, hurt people healed, souls brought to Christ, people loved, children born.

We may help to change the lives of our families, our parish, our communities, even our country, or the world. And we will also plant many kinds of seeds – seeds of faith, or education, or love – and we may see those seeds take root, and flower. But we will not see them all flower. And some seeds grow slowly – some tasks or changes take a long time – like 40 years in the desert. And that may at times tempt us to lose heart – when we want change, or growth, or healing for our loved ones or our community and it takes so long, moves so slowly, maybe even sometimes seems to get lost and go backward. But we do not need to lose heart – we do not need to despair. In all these labors we are not working alone.

Moses started leading the people of Israel to freedom with God, and God continued the work, with Joshua, even after Moses had gone. And our work – our labors and love, are also a part of God’s great work – His work of redemption, healing, and salvation for all his people. So we are never working alone, or responsible for doing it all. We are coworkers with God and with each other in a great labor of love.

Another passage we hear today is much more familiar, especially to those of us who usually come to Rite I services, and frequently hear: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This passage is *so* familiar that it might be hard for us to even truly hear and feel it. But looking through the lens of this passage about the death of Moses, suddenly I see these words of Jesus (who in fact, is quoting *Moses’* words!) I see these words from Jesus as another sign of this great common task and labor of love that God and humanity take part in together.

Love God, and love your neighbor. Serve God with your heart and soul and mind and strength, and serve your neighbor. We are all of us bound together in working to serve and love and heal this world. We are bound to God, the strength behind all our efforts. We are bound to people across the world who pursue and serve causes greater than themselves. And we are bound in a powerful, mystical way, to Christians across time and space who have loved and served God and their neighbor as we do today.

At the 9am service today we celebrated a baptism, bringing John James Green into the Body of Christ and this spiritual communion across time and space. Next week we will once again celebrate this community – the Communion of Saints, as we celebrate the Feast of All Saints and remember those many people, those known by name and those unknown, who have carried on God’s work in this world throughout all times and are united to us in our common baptism.

And baptism unites us by joining us to Christ, in his death and resurrection. The sign of baptism is perhaps strongest when we see it in what we call “full immersion” – with people being plunged under water to be baptized, and then rising from the water again. But no matter how much water we use, baptism is actually a sign of *burial* – of death – and then of *rising* – of resurrection – following the example and the path pioneered by our Lord.

Jesus shows us our great hope in His resurrection, when He shows that even when we all lay our lives down, finish our tasks, or leave them unfinished, we will rise again, and we will witness with joy the completion of God’s great work. We will witness the joy and the success of all those people who have labored before us in this work, and those who will keep working after we go to our rest.

One day we will see the whole of God’s amazing, beautiful plan of love for the world, and see how we, with our own efforts, have played our small part in it. And so we rejoice, with Moses and all God’s people in every time and place, that victory and success is coming, and is already on its way, and we each have a part to play in God’s great work of love.