

A Departure but Not an Epitaph

Deuteronomy 34:1-2

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I have loved this final chapter  
in the story of Moses  
ever since a friend of mine  
preached on it  
in seminary over 15 years ago.

It was the first time  
I'd ever even paid attention  
to this story.

I mean there are so many stories in the Bible,  
so many defining moments,  
especially as Israel becomes a nation  
—we sing songs about Father Abraham  
and Noah and the arky, arky...  
but as far as I know  
there aren't any VBS songs  
on this final chapter of Deuteronomy  
—no cutesy rhymes about

Moses full of vigor/  
climbs the mountain/  
to see the land of bigger  
...promise.

See what I did there?

And if I am truthful,  
I don't remember  
all the details of my friend's sermon,  
but we were taking a youth ministry class  
and my friend, Chip,  
summed up his point to say  
that this story was the story of youth ministry  
—of someone who walks with others  
for a time  
but only so far.  
His *takeaway*  
was that for many of us

who would soon be applying  
for jobs to work with youth in churches  
was that we'd have these youth  
for just a few short years—  
just a small amount of time  
in comparison to their years ahead  
a small amount of time  
to make relationships,  
to build on a good foundation  
and then send them on  
these babies disguised as high schoolers—  
we the church  
would send them out into the world  
to be the face of the Lord  
we love and serve.

But *this*,  
this story of Moses  
is for more  
than just youth ministers.  
It is for all ministers.  
It is for all parents.  
It is for any Christian  
really,  
any faithful person,  
who dares to hope  
that what they do today,  
might help prepare for  
the bigger and fuller promise of tomorrow.

The land of milk and honey.  
The promise that *the where*  
of right now  
is not *the where*  
in which you will stay  
—the promise that there is always  
there is **more** room and space,  
**more** grace,  
there is **more** abundance,

there is **more** hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr. ended his *Dream* speech,  
quoting this Moses story  
from the Lincoln Memorial in 1968.

“That great modern-day prophet  
used the story of Israel’s first great prophet  
to speak of hope and faith  
to a people who needed both.  
[This] story can continue to speak to [us] today,  
who, even in the midst of disappointment,  
live by faith in the God of Moses,  
the God who does indeed fulfill promises.”<sup>1</sup>

Moses is Israel’s greatest prophet.

The story tells us,  
“never since, has there arisen  
a prophet in Israel like Moses,  
whom the Lord knew,  
face to face.  
He was unequaled...”

I don’t know many leaders  
that we would say,  
he or she was unequaled, do you?

Sure, we have our favorites but still,  
what a title!

What made Moses a great leader?  
It wasn’t that he was flawless,  
in fact, far from it.

Moses, you remember, had a temper.

Early on, as a young man,  
he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave  
and Moses killed the Egyptian  
—murdered him.

And then he fled.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-deuteronomy-341-12-2>

But still, he is the leader of leaders.  
    Though there is much scholarly debate  
        about Moses why only  
        viewed the promised land from afar,  
            it seems Moses' temper  
is likely what sealed his non-entrance  
    into the land  
        God had prepared for God's people.

You should just remember  
    that Moses wasn't a perfect person.  
        Moses had flaws.  
    He got cranky leading God's people  
        for 40 years through the wilderness.  
        Moses wasn't the perfect leader.  
            In fact, there is no such thing  
                as a perfect leader.  
            Which means it wasn't really  
        Moses' character or personality  
    or even behavior  
    that bestowed the title  
of greatest prophet ever.

You know about Stephen Covey's,  
    7 Habits of Highly Effective Leaders, don't you?  
    Covey's work is designed  
        around habits and corresponding principles.  
        The habit as an effective leader  
        might be that you are proactive  
        and that means your guiding principle  
is you understand responsibility and initiative.

I'm not sure I'd count Moses as proactive  
    —he understood the responsibility  
    but totally resisted his role as a leader  
        at first.  
        Remember how he came up  
            with excuses to convince God  
            to find someone else to be a leader?

Covey also points out  
a highly effective leader  
has the habit of beginning and ending with the mind.  
That guiding principle means  
you have vision and values.  
Maybe we can give Moses this one  
—after all Deuteronomy tells us  
that even at 120 years old  
Moses's sight was unimpaired  
and his vigor had not abated!

My favorite Covey habit is Sharpen the Saw,  
which is the principle of renewal—  
the understanding that in order  
to maintain and increase effectiveness,  
we need to renew ourselves,  
mind, body, and spirit.

How many times  
did Moses remind the people of Israel  
of their need for renewal—  
that if they just followed God,  
if they'd keep the covenant  
God set before them?  
The answer is lots.

This serves as my summary  
of the rest of the Old Testament,  
sharpen the saw;  
renew thyself by remembering  
who you are and whose you are.

But the point to take away here  
is that Moses is known as the greatest of leaders  
who led the people of Israel  
on this extraordinary journey.  
He was a leader par excellence.  
And he is awarded this title,  
not for any other reason than,  
he was one who knew God face to face.

Now as Christian readers of this story  
it holds more for us than just  
the encounter of going up the mountain  
and being in the presence of God.  
Because as Christians,  
we've heard Jesus say,  
because you know me, you know my Father;  
we've heard Jesus say,  
when you help a brother or a sister in need,  
it is like you are helping me.  
When you are quick  
to be present with a friend in grief,  
well, it is like you are my presence with them.  
If you do something in my name,  
it is like I am the one doing it.  
This is my short summary  
of the New Testament.

So as Moses knew God face to face  
and Christ tells us  
seeing him equals  
seeing God,  
this means we are given the opportunity to  
live out our lives  
as though God were there,  
present, active, living.

We are given the opportunity to believe  
that we were the very  
hands and feet of the Lord,  
and holding on to this promise,  
means there have been many of us  
who have beheld the face of God.

Today I want to talk about just one,  
just one more leader who, like Moses,  
has known God face to face.

As Whit spoke his benediction last week,  
this story of Deuteronomy  
popped into my head.  
I listened to Whit say,  
“this is not about me” ...  
and I thought—  
that is something a good leader says.  
That is something that a good leader,  
who journeyed with the people  
would say.

That is something that a leader says,  
who has held our babies  
and the font  
and table of Wednesday Night Supper.

Who has sent those big babies  
disguised as high schoolers  
out into the world.

A leader who has seen the face of God  
as he helped us lay our loved ones to rest;  
who has sung, For All the Saints  
and Great is Thy Faithfulness  
with a lump in his throat  
for us and with us.

Whit said,  
this is not about me.  
And he is right.  
The church is people,  
the church is living and breathing  
and showing the face of God  
everywhere we go.

But good leaders  
don't talk about themselves.  
They talk about the people.  
They talk about the power of God  
working through them.  
Good leaders will praise others.

Whit, you have been  
such a good leader.

There will not be another Whit for us  
—there will be other pastors  
who in their own right  
will be wonderful,  
just as you are.

And none of our leaders,  
none our pastors,  
thyselves included,  
are flawless or perfect.

But there is no doubt  
that you like Moses  
have faithfully walked this journey with all of us,  
and now you will take  
your vision and vigor  
and depart,  
you will enter  
a promised land that is well-deserved.

You have prepared us to continue going.  
You have been with us this far,  
and now you send us into the continued land  
of hope,  
abundance,  
grace  
and promise.

You yourself will enter the land  
of well-earned rest and renewal.

In my Bible,  
the heading over this last section,  
of this last book  
of Israel coming into God's promise,  
the heading is,  
*Moses' departure and epitaph.*

Whit, this is the season of your departure



but not your epitaph.  
As our leader  
we are beyond grateful for the many ways  
that you have been with us on  
this journey towards God's promises.  
You have surely seen God face to face  
here in Hickory,  
in Ames,  
in Louisville,  
in Atlanta,  
in all the places  
where you have faithfully served  
the family of God.

Whit, to offer a short summary  
from a great leader  
who borrowed from another great leader,  
We've got some difficult  
but wonderful days ahead.  
We pray that you've been to the mountaintop.

Like anybody, we would like you to live a long life.  
Longevity has its place.  
But we know  
you aren't as concerned about that  
as you are about doing God's will.

May this be a mountain top  
that you are able to look out over.  
We pray you can see the promised land.

And thank you for taking us with you,  
and being with us  
on this extraordinary journey of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

### **Benediction**

Claude gets credit for this benediction:

In the book of Numbers,  
Chapter 8 says,

<sup>24</sup>This applies to the Levites:  
from twenty-five years old and upward  
they shall begin to do duty  
in the service of the tent of meeting;  
<sup>25</sup>and from the age of fifty years  
they shall **retire**  
from the duty of the service  
and serve no more.

Ha!

Numbers, also has this blessing,

For you and for us

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make **his face to shine upon you**

and be gracious to you;

the Lord lift up his countenance upon you

and give you peace.