

Hespeler 25 October, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Deuteronomy 34, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

Do these words sound familiar to you? *“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But 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. 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 words should sound familiar. I may not be able to deliver them with the same power and cadence as the original speaker, but they ought to still ring a bell. They were spoken by a man named Martin Luther King Jr. They were the final part of a speech that he gave on April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. And the Mason Temple in Memphis is a church and he was a preacher, and so, though it had political content, it wasn’t a speech. It was a sermon.

It was not the most famous sermon that that man ever preached. That has got to be the one that he preached in Washington DC at the foot of the Lincoln Monument. You can probably quote that one directly, at least parts of it – especially the parts about “I have a dream,” and, “Let freedom ring.”

But this sermon, the “I’ve been to the mountaintop” sermon, has got to be a close second. It was a great sermon preached by a great preacher. Even more important, it was one of the sermons preached by that man that I believe God used to sustain a movement that literally changed the world. Now that is a high bar. It is also very intimidating to me where I stand today.

You see, the biblical text that King was preaching on that day was the very same passage that I have chosen to take up today – the story of the death of Moses from the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. The mountain he was talking about was Mount Nebo and he was reflecting on the heartbreak of the fact that Moses, who had lived so long with only one dream in his heart, the dream of bringing his people into the Promised Land where they could live free and blessed lives, would not himself live to see his dream come to life and would only see the Promised Land from afar.

And when I think of the sermon that King preached that day, it almost gives me chills because he was not just talking about ancient history, he was talking about what he was living.

For so much of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. had given everything for the dream of a Promised Land – a land in which people who looked like him could have a fair and equal stake.



And, at that point in his career, there had been some pretty incredible progress towards that goal, but it was also so very plain that there was still a long way to go. Indeed, looking back today over 50 years later, especially as we reflect on some of the events that took place just this summer, you can't help but recognize that there is still a long way to go before we can truly enter that land. So, he may have seen his Promised Land from a distance, but he also seems to have had very long sight.

But the sermon is even more poignant than that, when you realize that King preached that sermon on a Wednesday and on the very next day, on Thursday, he was shot dead by an assassin's bullet. And I know there's no way that he could have known that was coming, but, in a way, when you consider what he said that night, it seems that he did.

And now maybe you can understand why I feel like I'm in a difficult spot today. Given what somebody else has so masterfully done with this particular text, I am feeling totally overmatched. What could I possibly bring to a sermon on this text that could ever be more moving, more powerful or more memorable than what that other fellow did? But, fortunately, preaching is not a competitive sport. The point of it is not to win or to outdo someone else.

What is the point of preaching? It is to discover what God has to say to God's people through this particular text at this particular moment. And it is kind of amazing to realize that that can actually happen. That, on that Wednesday in Memphis Tennessee, God took an ancient text that was written maybe 2,700 or more years ago and which told a story that went even farther back into the mists of Israel's history and God spoke through the amazing mind of that preacher to make that ancient passage speak and make sense of the totally impossible situation in which God's people found themselves at that moment in time.

And it seemed to apply so perfectly – as if that passage had been written with that particular historical circumstance in mind. I'm kind of blown away every time I think of that. And yet it is something that happens again and again. These ancient passages do continue to speak to us and challenge and convict us. This story of Moses on Mount Nebo is an archetype – a story that is powerfully typical of people facing similar situations.

How many leaders down through history have been able to bring their people to a certain point and yet, seemingly tragically, were not able to see that dream they put before their people actually come to pass? How many people have brought projects to just before that point of realization only to have to hand it off to someone else to take it across the finish line? That's what happened to Moses, but it just keeps on happening. I've experienced that in my own life when I have been able to take the churches that I have worked with to a certain point, but then have to let go and let others take on the vision and make it their own.

This story of Moses on Mount Nebo certainly seems to be one that might have a lot to say to us in our present situation. We have lived through a time, especially in the last few months, when everything seems to be in flux. Old ways of doing things have had to be abandoned or reinvented. It has been a season when we have had to try lots of things, some of which haven't worked and some of which have only worked imperfectly, but still, in all of this imperfection, we may be getting a sense of what the future might look like and how it might be very different.

So, in some ways, this might be a perfect time for me to preach an “I’ve been to the mountaintop” sermon and for me to describe for you the landscape of the Promised Land that I think God may be laying out before his people today. But, you know what, I don’t think I’m going to do that. And it’s not because I’m afraid of what might happen to me tomorrow if I do. It is more that I don’t think I have yet seen what that Promised Land might look like. At least, I don’t have the big picture. I’m not sure anyone has seen it. I guess conditions are kind of foggy these days on the top of Mount Nebo.

There have been times when I thought that – that God had given me a unique vision of what the future would look like for his people – but I’ve learned a bit of humility in recent times. I’m not sure God has given anyone that vision yet. We’re all kind of making it up as we go along these days.

No, rather than taking us all to the mountaintop and giving us that big vision, what I want to do today is take this powerful story and this powerful passage of scripture and give it back to you. As I said, I find it amazing how God spoke to and through Martin Luther King Jr using this passage over 50 years ago. But the amazing thing is this, God doesn’t just do that for the Martin Luther King Jrs of this world. I believe that this passage is so powerful that God actually wants to take it and apply it to your life today.

So put yourself in the place of Moses today. God is coming to you right now and God is inviting you to go with him up to the top of Mount Nebo because God has something to show you. And, yes, let me reassure you that I don’t mean to say by that that the same thing that happened to Moses and to King is going to happen to you. I don’t have any prophecy that anybody is going to die here on this mountain. But I do believe that, even when death is not on the line, God does bring us to those Mount Nebo moments. And I do not know what is going on in each one of your lives, but I do somehow believe that God has brought each one of us to this passage this morning for a reason.

Maybe you have been working on some project in your personal life, at your work or in some other passion that you have. And this project has been a good and meaningful part of your life up until now. But I have a word from God for you this morning. You have brought this project as far as you have been called to bring it. God is taking you to Mount Nebo and is saying to you that, yes you have done well and you have taken this project as far as you were supposed to take it. You’ve laid out the vision as best as you can, but it is actually now time for you to pass that vision onto someone else to bring it to conclusion. It is hard to let go, God understands that, but there is also a freedom in being able to do that. And being able to trust that God will use someone else to bring that vision to its fullness.

Or maybe that is not why God has brought you to Mount Nebo. Maybe it’s something else. I believe that every parent at some point needs to be taken by God to Mount Nebo. When your children are growing, of course, you need to have visions and dreams for them. But there comes a time in every parent’s life when they need to let go of their own vision for the future of their child and entrust that future to the child him or herself. And this can be very difficult transition. It is one that I think I and my wife find ourselves in these days a lot, but it’s also a very good transition. There is a beauty in being able to go up Mount Nebo and have

God show you the wonderful future that God has in store for your child but that you need to let go of and let the child take control of it for him or herself. It is bitter but also sweet to be standing on the top of Mount Nebo and entrusting your child's future to God and your child.

The church is constantly in a Mount Nebo moment as well. I know that people who have been in leadership in the church over the years often complain that nobody wants to take up their jobs and do the things that they do. This is one of the constant struggles that people complain about in the church these days.

But I'm going to tell you something. One of the key reasons why younger generations are often unwilling to take on the ministry of the church from those who've been doing it for a long time is because the people who have been doing it for a long time have been unwilling to let go of their vision of how it has to be done. They need a trip up Mount Nebo and they need God to show them that there is a future for the church that may be different from what the past is, that they have done well indeed in bringing the church this far, but that it is time to let go of their vision of what the church is supposed to do and how it's supposed to do it and let others develop their own understanding of these things.

Do you see how powerful this passage is? Do you see how it is that God keeps bringing us back to Mount Nebo? An ancient text passed down to us through the centuries, how amazing that God continues to use it to speak so directly to God's people today!