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Deuteronomy 34:1-12

“The Long View”

We’ve been following the story of Moses off and on since August 28. Today, the story ends, so to speak, with his death.

Moses was 120 years old when he died, which is the Bible’s way of saying he was very, very old. But his health was quite good given his age. His sight was unimpaired and his vigor unabated, as the Bible says.

As was appropriate, the Israelites wept for Moses for 30 days, which was the proper period for mourning.

His life was remarkable in so many ways. He was saved from death by two maid servants and given to the Pharaoh’s daughter to raise as her own. He was brought up as an Egyptian prince, but had a soft spot for the Hebrew slaves and their plight. One day this got the best of him and he murdered an Egyptian who was severely beating one of the slaves. This caused him to flee Egypt and become a shepherd. It’s highly likely Moses had been a shepherd for many, many years when God spoke to him in the burning bush and called him to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. And what followed was a remarkable 40 year journey with many ups and downs and complaints and celebrations.

When today’s story opens, the Hebrew people are just weeks away from entering the Promised Land. They’re so close they can see it. The land is so close that God takes Moses to the top of Mount Nebo so he can get a good look at it. And then, Moses dies . . . at the Lord’s command.

I’ve said before that it has always struck me as very unfair, almost cruel, that after all Moses did for the Lord, that the Lord wouldn’t even let Moses set one foot in the Promised Land. The Bible gives a couple of reasons for this, neither of which are very satisfying. They also place God in the position of unfairly punishing Moses for crimes he either didn’t commit or were so minor they’re forgivable.

Since I don’t believe God goes around unfairly punishing people for crimes they didn’t commit, and since I happen to believe God is most forgiving of even the big crimes, I really struggle with this story. This struggle has led me to search for the meaning behind it, for surely there’s a meaning behind it. This is, after all the Bible we’re talking about—the Good News—capital G and capital N—and that Good News includes the Old Testament, too, contrary to popular belief.

And then it hit me, right there in verse 9, the Good News, the meaning behind it all: “Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded him.”

There was the meaning in black and white, so obvious but so obscure. I’d never noticed it before because I was so busy concentrating on the preceding verse about Moses’ death. But there was the Good News in that one verse. God would provide a new leader for the people; God would not abandon them at the border to the Promised Land and let them figure it out on their own. No, God would remain faithful to God’s promises and stay with them in the form of this new leader. God would call a new leader for them.

Which is wonderful Good News! God won’t leave the people on their own; God will help them; God will lift up a new leader for them! But it’s also bittersweet, because Joshua’s call to leadership also means Moses has been uncalled. That was a new term for me when I heard it; to be uncalled.

We talk all the time in church about being called; we’re called to leadership positions; we’re called to follow where God leads us; we’re called to get out of the boat and follow Jesus. The Bible is full of call stories. Moses’ call story is, in fact, one of the better ones. He doesn’t want to go; he comes up with every excuse in the book; but still God calls him to lead the people.

But in so many of these call stories, there is a corollary “uncall” story. Joshua was called, Moses was uncalled; Samuel was called, which meant Eli was uncalled; Elijah was called which meant Elisha was uncalled. In the New Testament, Jesus was called, but that also meant he was called away from his family; the first disciples were called by Jesus to drop their nets and follow him; but that meant they were called away from their father, who was left in the boat all alone watching them walk away.

In the church we do a great job of talking about being called to something, but we forget that also means we are called away from something. And being called away, or uncalled, can be painful. It’s hard to see how God can be at work in the uncalling, especially when we’ve been called away from a job we like, a home we cherish, a marriage we’ve tried to salvage, or a dream we’ve tried to make real. It’s hard to see how God is at work in the uncalling, because to be uncalled or called away from something, even if it’s of our own choosing, means we’re leaving something or someone behind.

I think about the time I was called here to be your pastor. I was thrilled to receive that call and move to St. Louis. But truth be told, the day the movers arrived, I wondered why I was doing it, leaving behind a good job and good friends and a good home, for you see my call here meant I was being called away from someplace else. And that was hard.

Sometimes the call away from something or someone is difficult because it means we have to come to the realization that we’re no longer the right person for the job, and that is hard to come to terms with, especially when you’ve given your heart and soul to something. Moses was a wonderful leader to lead the people *to* the Promised Land, but

he wasn't the one to lead them *in* the Promised Land. It can be hard to discern when our gifts and skills are no longer the right gifts and skills for the job. Personally, this type of discernment is not one of my strengths because I have a hard time saying no and letting go. I'm facing just such a time right now with one of my committee responsibilities for the presbytery; if I just keep at it and work a little harder or a little differently, I can make a difference and things will get better and everything will work out, I keep telling myself. But I know in my heart of hearts this isn't true; that my particular skill set is no longer the right skill set, and that it's time to move on; my call there has ended and best to acknowledge it myself before someone acknowledges it for me. Because I've been there too, and that's no fun. Being called away from something, or uncalled without our consent, is tough and humbling.

When Steve Jobs died, and his commencement speech to Stanford was played over and over, I was struck by something he said about the time he was fired from Apple. Being fired is the ultimate uncall. Jobs was devastated, didn't know what to do, and felt like a failure. He was rejected; but he had to start over.

He said:

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.

He started a company called NeXT and Pixar, maker of some of the best computer animated movies. He met his wife and, in an odd turn of events, went back to Apple via NeXT.

"I'm pretty sure none of this would have happened if I hadn't been fired from Apple," he said. "It was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it. Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith."

It's hard to see how God is at work in the uncall, but God is. God is at work when we're called away from something; in fact, sometimes it's God who is calling us away from something, even when that seems completely unfair and we're devastated by it. But as someone once said, wherever a door is shut, a window is opened. And we can trust God to lead us through the window, even though it's easier and less painful to go through the door.

If you learn nothing else from the story of Moses and the Exodus, learn that God doesn't only call us to something, like a Promised Land, God also calls us away from something, like Egypt. And don't forget that the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt on numerous occasions, but God kept moving them along, and away from, that life. God called them away from Egypt.

I'll never forget what one of my colleagues said to me once about leaving Egypt. I'd just given a charge to the presbytery as part of an installation service for our new Associate Executive Presbyter for Congregational Development. I told the presbytery that all of our churches need to get on the bandwagon of transformation before we all die. This colleague, who has done amazing things at his church and literally moved it from one place to another, told me about the Sunday the heat went out in the new place so they decided they were going to go back and worship in the old building where it was warm. "I told them," he said, "That even if you leave your wallet in Egypt, you don't go back for it!" That has always stayed with me, because who among us wouldn't go back to Egypt to get our wallet, even though we know we shouldn't.

And yet, as Christians, we stake our very faith on the idea that being called away from something brings new life. We call this resurrection; Jesus was called away from his earthly life to a new life so that we could have life! We believe that through death, the ultimate act of uncalling, we actually are called to a new life.

Steve Jobs, who wasn't a Christian, actually summed up this Christian belief quite well when he said at the end of his commencement address:

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true."

And then he went on to say those words we heard repeated in the days following his death:

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become."

Christians call that intuition, that nagging sensation that someone is trying to tell us something, God. Sometimes it's hard to see or understand why God is calling us away from something, or to see how God is at work in the uncall. I think this is why I missed the point of the story so many times. But God is at work in our lives; God is faithful; and God can be trusted.

So fear not, as the Bible likes to say. Fear not. For this story is as much about what we are called to as much as it is about what we are called away from, and what we learn in the story is that God can be trusted with our lives and God is at work in our lives in both the calling toward something and the calling away from something.

Amen.