

Eric Dupee

10/29/23, Deuteronomy 34:1-12 "Shaping the Future"

On this day in which we receive new members here at First Parish Church, our Scripture reading pertains to one of the great heroes of the faith. We've all probably heard of Moses. I'm sure we have varying degrees of familiarity with his story. I think this is a good time to take a moment and review his life's journey.

He was born in Egypt to Hebrew parents, under an edict by the Egyptian Pharaoh calling for the death of all newborn Israelite males. In a desperate attempt to save their son's life, his parents set him afloat on the Nile River in a basket. By chance, he was plucked from the river by Pharaoh's own daughter and raised in Pharaoh's house, separated from his parents and his people.

Fast-forward to his adult life, while being wanted in Egypt for murder and hiding out in the land of Midian, Moses encountered God at a burning bush. God said, "I want you to go to Pharaoh and tell him to free the Hebrew people." Moses objected. He said, "I'm unqualified. I don't speak very well." Of course, God informed him the task was not optional.

With God's help, Moses flees Egypt with the people. They miraculously crossed the Red Sea. Immediately, after entering the wilderness on the other side of the sea, his people began to complain. After all Moses did to bring them out of slavery, they decided they wanted to go back. Mind you, Moses didn't want this job in the first place.

When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the law and the Ten Commandments, the people down below forged a golden calf and began worshiping an idol. Who instigated that betrayal? It was his own brother: Aaron. When Moses married a woman from the land of Cush, his sister Miriam gossiped about him, saying very disparaging things about her brother. While wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, his people rebelled constantly and he was betrayed by his own siblings.

In our text today, he was one river crossing from his goal. From the top of Mt. Nebo, he can see the Promised Land laid out before him. It was within sight, but he would never enter it. He came to the end of his life and it must have felt like even God betrayed him.

I think this story depicts a hard truth about life. As human beings, we are limited creatures. Our lives are temporary. Even Moses, for whom we are reading today says, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.” He knew the Lord face-to-face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders God sent him to perform and even his journey ended before reaching his goal.

Our reading today is perhaps most associated with the last speech delivered by Martin Luther King before he was assassinated. In support of the Memphis sanitation strike, he conjured the image of Moses on Mount Nebo, saying, “I’ve been to the mountaintop.” He describes how he’s seen the Promised Land, a time and a place when justice would prevail. King prophetically announced that he might not get there with them, but they were almost there. It was in sight.

For me, the death of Moses is more personal. When I read this story, I can’t help but think of my mom. I’ve mentioned before she died of cancer at the age of 48-years-old. She lived long enough to see my sister graduate college and to see her get married. But she would not live to see me graduate or meet her grandchildren.

I know that in her mind’s eye she could see it. She envisioned growing old with my dad. She envisioned life as a grandmother. She came close. She was almost there, but that was a land she would not enter. In fact, before she died, she wrote a letter to the grandchildren she would never meet. She asked my sister to share that letter when her firstborn was old enough to understand.

I’ve always been touched by that gesture, because it showed a person making an investment in the future she would never see. She couldn’t be there for her grandchildren, but she could encourage them and share her love with them. Who knows what kind of an impact a gesture like that might have.

That’s the beauty of Moses’s story. He wouldn’t experience life in the Promised Land, but he had an amazing influence on it. With his guidance, his teaching, and his willingness to stay with it, even in the face of the betrayal of those closest to him, he shaped the future he would never see.

We get a glimpse of it in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy. Moses gathers all the tribes of the Israelites and blesses each of them. When they get their final destination, they might not have Moses with them, physically, but they will have his blessing.

In our reading today, Joshua is identified as the successor of Moses. We're told he was full of wisdom. Why? Because Moses conferred authority and wisdom to Joshua by placing his hands on him. Moses knew it was not all about himself. He simply had a role to play in God's greater story. He shaped the future he would never see by anointing Joshua to lead.

I have to say it's hard to find unqualified good news in this text, but I think there's something very powerful about the fact that none of the complaining and conflict and betrayal Moses faced dampened his blessing and influence on the future. He still invested in the future, he would not see. In this moment in time, while the world is on fire, I think that's really important.

Woody Allen once said, "Some people want to achieve immortality through their works or their descendants." He said, "I prefer to achieve immortality by not dying." Others have been more realistic. The Dalai Lama once said, "Share your knowledge. It is a way to achieve immortality." If we share our knowledge, or if we teach, we achieve a certain immortality, because we never know where, or if, our influence will end. The wisdom we pass along, might continue to get passed along over and over again.

Another way to shape the future we will never see is financially. A short time ago, we had a church member by the name of Gordan Linquist. He was a great supporter of the church. He was a painter and painted the buildings on our campus. He would bring Congdon's Doughnuts for the deacons on Sunday morning. When he died, Gordon left his home to First Parish church. In so doing, he helped to shape First Parish's future that he would never see.

How will you invest in the future you'll never see? To whom will you speak words of blessing over? Moses touched Joshua. Who will you touch and empower to do great things? To whom, in the next generation, will you write a letter? What will it say? Whom can you teach? Maybe it's children and youth in this church. Our financial pledges bless First Parish Church in the present, but through planned giving, financial gifts can shape the church's future.

Lastly, on this day in which we've received new members, this is a good time to mention that 350 years ago, First Parish Church called its first Congregational minister. Shubael Dummer was born in 1636. He came to serve First Parish in his mid-twenties at a time when the York citizenry was not nearly as sophisticated and refined as it is today. The

inhabitants of European descent were frontier people, adventurers. The town was once described as "an asylum for excommunicated and itinerant ministers."

Despite his family advising him to find a safer ministry, Dummer continued to support the people of the town through their various trials and sufferings. You might be aware of the Raid on York in 1692, known as the Candlemas Attack, in which the indigenous population with the help of French Canadians inflicted casualties and took prisoners back to Canada.

Dummer was one of the first to be killed as he was mounting his horse to visit a sick parishioner. His life was cut short. He never completed his ministry, but by his faithfulness and his commitment, he shaped the future of this church and the town of York.

I wonder if Rev. Dummer would have imagined that on October 29, 2023, three-hundred and fifty years after he was installed as the pastor, 11 people would be received into membership here at First Parish Church, the longest running congregation in the whole state of Maine.

Every one of us can envision a future in which we will never take part, but we can shape it by what we do today.