

On A Clear Day You Can See Forever

8 – Strength for the Journey

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Revelation 21:1-7

Matthew 22:34-46

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I stood at that spot where Moses stood on Mt. Nebo this summer in Jordan. In a few hours we had flown from Cairo, Egypt to Amman, Jordan, and been driven to this mountaintop point, 20 miles north of Amman. In two hours we had flown over those deserts through which Moses and the Israelites wandered for 40 years. In less than half a day we had transferred from that place of slavery in Egypt to this place near freedom in the Promised Land. From this spot we, like Moses, could see it all, could take it in. From the top of the mountain we looked west. The Dead Sea to the Southwest, the Jordan River and villages of Jericho directly West, Galilee to the Northwest, and the Mediterranean to the far west beyond sight. We overviewed this land, which actually looked pretty bleak and barren but which has for centuries been the land of God's promise. This land which continues to be the prime real estate of dispute and unrest in the world today.

When the Lord brought Moses up to Mt. Nebo, to the top of Pisgah we are told Moses saw it all, the land of Judah, Gilead, Naphtali, Jericho, as far as the Western Sea. The land of milk and honey. The land the Lord promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here was Moses on the cusp of entry, after 40 years of wandering, given vision to see what lay ahead, a foretaste of the future, yet told he will not be allowed to enter himself. Moses will die here.

In fact none of the original generation who departed from Egypt in the Exodus were allowed to enter. A whole generation, 40 years, had been spent in training, all those years wandering through wilderness places so that they might be taught, so that they might learn, not self-reliance but God-reliance. They had those occasions of particular Divine visitation, Sinai, and the giving of the Law, the thunder, the lightening, the earthquakes of the Holy Presence. They had as well those all-too-human occasions of sin and setback, occasions we have visited over the past few weeks, of hoarding bread, of making false gods – golden cows out of the gold God the Lord gave them, then of being disciplined and returning to the Lord, one long repeated cycle of sin and failure, repentance and renewal. Moses had been given an unruly bunch to tame, these chosen people. Yet God continued to lead them, to shape them, to bring them closer and closer to his land of promise. Now Moses, greatest of them all, is, like the whole generation, given a look but prohibited from entering.

The day we stood upon Mt. Nebo was a crisp clear summer afternoon and we could see far and wide. We would later drive down the mountain and cross the border at the King Hussein Bridge from Jordan into Israel. And that final portion of our journey, traversing only about 40 miles into Jerusalem would be the longest and most chaotic and confusing part of our long day taking us 7 hours. We had come much more quickly and easily from Egypt to Jordan than from this short distance separating Islamic Jordan from Jewish Israel.

I

The point is God had a grand plan in mind when he showed Moses the land. God still has a plan in mind, and we, like Moses, like the children of Israel, are invited to participate on the way with God heading into the Promised Land, or as Jesus calls it, “The Kingdom of God.” But we, like Moses, like the disciples, like the Church through the ages, never fully arrive at our destination until we make our final transition.

Only God ever fully completes anything. We live amid the partial and incomplete even as we make our contributions; add our gifts and talents to those things God puts on our hearts and minds to undertake along the way. Only God finishes what he starts, and we are left to deal with the loose ends, the broken dreams, and unfinished business that is our lot.

Jesus, however, gives us more to work with than Moses and the Israelites had those 1,200 years earlier, as he brings together in this teaching during the last days of his life, one short saying, the greatest commandment, and its twin. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Of all 613 Commandments in the Law, which is the most important? How would you ever rank them? How could the top be chosen? Jesus, however, brings together at this point of convergence, like unto Moses’ vision there on the Mountain, an amazing summary that encompasses all the rest,

“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,”ⁱ he said.

Jesus takes two separate sections from the Hebrew Scriptures and brings them together in an intensified form, grounded in love. He states, in full agreement with the Ten Commandments, the priority of loving God, but then in the very next sentence he adds a second which is right up there with it, love of neighbor as we love self. He begins right out of the Hebrew Scriptures, yet with the emphasis on comprehensive love of both God and neighbor together. Short. Succinct. Demanding. Comprehensive. The Grand Plan.

The point is this: on rare occasions God grants us a vision of the whole, but we spend most of our lives on only a little part of the whole, with partial vision and distant memory, and will end with things still incomplete. Even so, we can be part of something great.

II

God graciously brings Moses to this place of convergence where he can see destination. Here it all comes together. “Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land.”ⁱⁱ This is what God has promised him. This is where God has been leading him. Yet he will not be permitted to enter.

If you think about it, most things of significant value remain incomplete. God, the Scriptures show us, has a grand design. Yet one generation is too short a time to see the transformation we long for. No great cathedrals have been built in one generation. John, from his exile on Patmos, had this vision he sets forth in Revelation of a final new heaven and new earth, where everything will be changed, tears wiped away, death, mourning, crying, pain, no more. That is where all this is headed. God, through the thousands of years of his Revelation unfolding in Holy Scripture, shows us he has a marvelous plan progressively underway. But we get to participate in only a tiny bit of it. Yet we call this little bit of God's plan, in its comprehensive sense, "The will of God." We Christians believe God has a will, a purpose, a design for our lives. Through people and life circumstances, surrounded by prayer and seeking, we get to participate in it through our actions and our attitudes. We help carry out some sense of it, if we are attentive, if we are willing to be led. But then things get cut off short. Tragedies. Sickness. Suffering. Death.

We got the contours of American democracy down on paper in a just few years in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Yet we are still at work living it out and seeing it through to completion. We do not yet see the full implementation of this plan of which we in this nation are a part. Abraham Lincoln, once a vacillating failed politician, was used mightily to bring the Union of this nation back together from its civil strife. Yet his life was cut short and he was not given the opportunity to carry out the healing between the South and the North which he envisioned.

Martin Luther King, Jr. a preacher right here in Alabama, was used to bring to at least legal reality the promises of our founding documents, that all men (and women) are created equal, over which that war in the 1860's had been fought. Yet he too, like Lincoln, was taken from the earthly scene by the brutal assassin's bullet. Neither Lincoln nor King got to see the fruit of their labors. Neither got to enjoy grandchildren or old age. But they were part of a larger plan that was unfolding.

III

For the hard reality is things get cut short, Moses is not allowed to enter. God said, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." We are always dealing with the partial and the incomplete. We do not get to live out the full extent of our dreams. Whether our years on earth are many or few we do not get to experience the fullness of all that motivated us in the beginning.

Yet from our partial view we can learn to trust God for the whole, for the big picture, for the things unseen. We can learn to live in fresh ways that will enable us to enjoy each day and each experience given us with genuine gratitude in our hearts. That is, I think what Jesus' great commandment demonstrates.

Two tests precede this one from different factions. First about the great commandment. Legalistic Pharisees and opportunistic Herodians try to trip Jesus up with whether to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Then elite Sadducees who don't even believe in the resurrection try to trip him up asking about who gets the wife in heaven. Now comes this third test, from the Pharisees again,

who send in a lawyer to do their dirty work, trying to get Jesus to trip up on the commandments by asking which is the greatest. Instead of singling out only one that might put him outside orthodoxy of any group, he answers briefly and comprehensively in a way that signifies God and all God's children are to be loved without exception. And we, from our partial points of view, are called to live out of this center, out of this complete, out of this whole, even though we ourselves will rarely be given the opportunity, to see the full panorama from the mountain top. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "It's all right to talk about the long white robes over yonder, in all its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here."

IV

You see, while God has a great comprehensive plan unfolding, (Moses got to see the whole land Israel is on the verge of entering), and yet while we in our individual lives do not get to see the completion of our hopes and dreams, (Moses was not permitted to enter the land), still we are invited and encouraged and enabled and empowered by the presence of this God in our lives, Jesus Christ the risen Lord, to engage and participate in the outworking of this plan. As Paul writes to the Philippians, "I am confident of this, that he who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱⁱ God may complete with someone else what God began with you. But God will complete the plan!

Life is full of setbacks, sorrows, sadness and suffering. There is much we cannot explain, and many questions we have for God when we finally do cross over. I've got a drawer full. Meanwhile there are these days of our lives. How are we using them? Where are we spending our time and our money? In what are we investing?

We can participate in God's unifying plans and purposes in this world, where his grace is at work. We can be part of God's great restoration, if we hold tightly to Jesus' Great Commandment, and work to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. We can be part of the mending and not the destruction. We can be open to, as John Leith put it,

"the living, active, personal presence of God, available in all historical events, and in all natural events, the grace that is the final word in every such event. And through this grace all that unfolds, can yet be used to achieve the purposes of God. So that there are no dead end streets in life in which evil is the final word, no enclosures from which there is no exit."^{iv}

We can give up our lives to God and God's service responding to God's call to us from our places of partial view and incompleteness. We can come and give ourselves for something great that will outlast us. As Craig Barnes says, "Our mission is to live in the midst of brokenness we cannot fix with a vision of God's healing – healing from the damage people have wrought by playing God in the world."^v

Our stewardship is a powerful way for us to do this. We make a statement about our priorities when we fill out these little cards. Terry Slaughter and Chad Fooshee have helped us focus, in challenging us to "Becoming Fully Alive In Christ," – reminding us that "Becoming

fully alive in Christ unleashes a spirit of true sacrificial love. Giving out of love transforms us.” Love for God. Love for neighbor. As we are in Christ and offer our gifts beyond our comfort levels, beyond mere tokenism and club dues, as we truly give - not because we must but because we may - in response to all God has entrusted to our care as stewards, and in recognition that the earth and all that is in it belongs to God and not to us, we actually come alive. We live as never before. “I am come,” Jesus says, “that you may have life and have it to the full.”^{vi}

Kathleen Norris retells one of the stories of the Desert Fathers, in her book Dakota: A Spiritual Biography.

“Abbot Lot went to see Abbot Joseph and said, ‘Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of bad thoughts. Now what more should I do?’ The elder Abbot stretched out his hands to heaven. His hands became like lamps of fire and he said, ‘Why not become all flame?’^{vii}

Why don’t we really sell out to God? Why don’t we offer God a truly sacrificial gift this year out of deep devotion, deep love? “You shall love the Lord your God with your all.” Our whole selves, and reflect that in what we release to God’s direction of our money, that his Kingdom may be strengthened, his work enabled, his passionate love empowered. “Why not become all flame?”

Because, you see God does have a wonderful plan that is being worked out through the ups and downs of history. He gives us the vision. He lets us see enough to be a part of the whole, even though we shall never see the plan completed in this life. Still, we can unite heart and hands and voices, bodies, minds, wills, resources, loving God and loving neighbor, to bring the vision closer. “Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.”^{viii} God is at work and longs to use you!

Amen.

ⁱ Matt. 22:36-40

ⁱⁱ Deut. 34:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Phil. 1:6

^{iv} John Leith, The Reformed Imperative, “God’s Providing, Ordering, and Caring”

^v Craig Barnes, Yearnings – Living Between How It Is and How It Ought To Be, p.174

^{vi} John 10:10

^{vii} Kathleen Norris Dakota, quoted by Frank Harrington, First Comes Faith, p. 111

^{viii} The Hymn Book, p.200, “God is Working His Purpose Out”