

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/29/2017, Deuteronomy 34:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

One of the defining moments in seminary for me came in the first few days of Hebrew language class. Before it started, I had been trying to teach myself the Hebrew alphabet for a few weeks. It's unlike anything I had ever studied before. People describe it as squiggles and dots.

The second day of class, we had to be able to reproduce the entire Hebrew alphabet on a quiz. It was challenging, but we did it. Then we had to learn vowels. This was followed by a quiz on pronouns, and then I hit a wall. I was sure that seminary had been a mistake. I'd uprooted Gary and our life for no reason. I was a disaster.

Around that time, we were given a list of proper names in Hebrew. I remember staring at the squiggles and dots on that list. They were confusing. It was like being a little kid again, trying to sound out letters, trying to make sense of an alien world.

I was looking at three letters with a few of those dots that made up the vowels—mo-sh-sheh?

Then I realized: Moisheh. Moses. I was looking at Moses' name, written in Hebrew. I was overcome, and fell madly in love with the Hebrew language in that moment; and while there were other walls to come in my study of Hebrew, I pushed through them, because reading that name was magic.

Moses. Such a great prophet.

Our study of the book of Exodus may have ended last week, but we have one more passage about Moses today. A passage about his death, just outside the Promised Land. These verses are the very end of the book of Deuteronomy. While this is our only passage from Deuteronomy this season, it's a continuation of the story we've been talking about for two months in our Exodus series. This passage is also the end of the entire Torah, the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Bible.

I am currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Writing, so I can tell you with some authority that passage was crafted to be a satisfying ending. Moses had wandered around for forty years, following the exodus from slavery. In this twelve-verse ending, God showed him the Promised Land, which had been sworn to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants. There it was. And then, Moses died.

Then we get his age, that his sight was unimpaired, so he could appreciate the beautiful view of the Promised Land before he died; then we hear about the next leader, and end with the assertion that there has never been a prophet like Moses.

Very intentional ending.

But it's tragic, that after all he went through, Moses did not get to enter the Promised Land. Wouldn't that have been more satisfying, to have him end as a very old man in a new land,

surrounded by his descendants? Then maybe they could erect a big Moses monument to him, and people could pay him homage after death.

Instead, the promised land was still a promise for Moses.

My favorite Deuteronomy commentary was written by my favorite professor at seminary, Stephen Cook, and he offers a couple of reasons why the story ended this way.

First, remember the golden calf? The Israelites struggled in their wanderings in the desert with a God they couldn't see. We heard a lot about that in our Exodus readings, but there's even more when you read the full book of Exodus, not just the snippets we can cover in here on Sunday mornings. They complained a *lot*, and never seemed to fully appreciate God. God and Moses argued about the people a lot.

The people were prone to idols, just as we all are. If they had buried Moses themselves, perhaps built a monument on his grave: had they done that, they might have been tempted to worship Moses, their memory of Moses and his mighty deeds, rather than God, because was harder to understand God.

Dr. Cook also explains that since the people don't know where Moses is buried and no longer have Moses with them, they now have to orient themselves to Scripture. They don't have Moses, but they now have these five books, which teach them about God and about the love that God had for them. And God's expectations of them.

That the Promised Land remains just out of reach for Moses really makes this passage a great choice, I think, for our last day of Destination 2067 talks. The Promised Land is ahead of us. We can see it. We have dreams that will come true there.

Some of these dreams might take place after our journey with St. David's is completed. I have a mandatory retirement of 72 for example, and we have some 27 years left to pay off our parish hall debt, so that's a promise that I might not get to experience myself.

And that's OK, because I can still do so much on our journey together. And so can you.

We will continue toward the Promised Land for the rest of our journey at St. David's. Some of us might be here until we are laid to rest from this place. Some of us might get called somewhere else. But we can see the Promised Land, and I hope we will continue to walk towards it. To dream, and to do what we can to make those dreams materialize. And yes, that includes making a financial pledge.

We don't get to spend much time in the book of Deuteronomy, but it has a strong sense of place. Place matters. *This* place, St. David's, matters. While I might not get to see the parish hall debt paid off while I'm still the rector, there are other wonderful milestones along the way. Like baptisms. Today we get to baptize Sullivan. Did you know that his mother Courtney was also baptized here, back in the 1980s? Isn't that amazing?

Place matters. *This* place matters.

I pray that one of Sullivan's children or Riley's children might be baptized here someday. That is something I probably won't get to do or see, but it's a promise that I love to hold in front of me.

This book of Deuteronomy has a satisfying ending, but it's just the end of the book, not the end of the story. There are also prophets and books of wisdom ahead of God's people. There's Jesus. His miraculous birth, his earthly ministry, and his earth-shattering resurrection. The epistles and the vision of Revelation, and then we have the history of the early church, the middle ages, and the Reformation, which some churches celebrate today as Reformation Sunday...and then we have today, right now, *our* part in this amazing story of God and God's relationship with God's people.

Moses did not live to see the end, because the story still has not ended, thousands of years later. Moses was a steward, starring in his chapter of the story, and clearly, Moses was one of the Big Names. But even as a Big Name, Moses was mainly a steward, caring for one particular piece of God's kingdom at one particular time, and now we are entrusted with this piece at this time. Our story today is the end of Moses, but it's the beginning of the next book.

St. David's is at an exciting point in our ministry. I hope that, like me, you can hardly wait to see what happens next. What are your dreams? What will you promise?