

## Moses' Vision

Today, we say goodbye to one of the greatest prophets and leaders in the Bible: Moses.

We've been journeying with him for several weeks now in our lectionary, from his trip as a baby down the Nile and his childhood in Pharaoh's house, to his murder of an Egyptian and flight into Midian. We heard God call him from a burning bush and give him a mission: to go to Egypt and lead God's people into freedom. We rooted for him in the showdown with pharaoh, and in Israelites' harrowing escape from Egypt.

We shared his excitement when he received the 10 Commandments, and then his rage when he came back down from Mt. Sinai and found the people partying around a golden calf. Discouraged and doubtful, Moses asked YHWH for something to hold onto—for some kind of assurance that God was, indeed, God, in spite of all this, and that God was, indeed, with Moses, after all. YHWH agreed. And then showed Moses what he could handle of divine glory. And that's where we left Moses last week: staring at God's backside.

Yes, over these weeks, Moses has become our companion in faith—and in doubt and in discipleship. So it may come as a surprise to hear that Moses, our friend and hero, has passed. It was a peaceful death, we're told. YHWH had just led Moses up another mountain, and shown him the whole promised land, and told him, "*This is the land I promised; I've let you see it, but you shall not cross over there.*"

With this vision before him, Moses dies. The Israelites weep for him. And then the period for mourning ends, and life goes on. After all Moses' work, he never gets a "Thank you," or even an "I'm sorry" from the whiney Israelites, who gave him so much grief. Instead, it's *Joshua* who gets to enter the Promised Land. *Joshua*, who gets to see the end of the journey. *Joshua*, who gets to put in the last puzzle piece.

The biblical authors seemed to find this ending problematic. So in Numbers 20, an explanation is offered: this is punishment for Moses not following God's instructions to a tee—for striking a rock instead of speaking to it.

And yet, to me, this ending needs no explanation. It's pretty true to experience, isn't it? Often, we work hard for causes that *matter*--we serve and minister, and make sacrifices. But we don't get to see the fruit of our work. Often, we despair of ever making a difference. Or, fearing our efforts will be in vain, we hold ourselves back, or don't ever get started to begin with.

Many of us wrestle with vocation. "*What am I here for, and what should I do with my life?*" I wonder if these questions preoccupy us because we feel lost, today, afloat. Because we don't have a sense of purpose, or vision. Because we don't know what to hold onto anymore. Or because we try to hold onto the wrong things.

Personally, I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out my purpose, my own secret mission. I was convinced that it would be smooth sailing once I figured it out. And, successful and respected, I would get to sit back and feast proudly on the fruits of my labor.

But that still hasn't happened. Instead, as I've stepped into the ministries right in front of me, I've found myself aware of, and confronting, problems that seem intractable—individual tragedies and social ills that persist, in spite of my best efforts.

Moses' story invites me, and *us*, to rethink our purpose, our role in God's mission. It humbles us ministers, prophets, teachers, and leaders (which is ALL of us), by reminding us, gently, "*It's not all about you.*" This is something Moses had to learn, too. Remember when God first commissioned him? *Very* aware of his limitations, and worried that this mission was all up to him, Moses said "No! No, not me!" But over time, he began to see that it wasn't all up to him, after all, and that God would work through him. And this freed him to do amazing things.

It also freed him to share leadership. Earlier, at Jethro's suggestion, Moses appointed seventy elders to lead with him. And now, at the end of his life, he anointed Joshua to finish the journey. Moses didn't seem resentful that Joshua might get credit, or that Joshua would get to drink all that milk and honey. No, Moses put the needs of his community and the commands of his God before his ego.

Moses' leadership was much more about following God than justifying himself. He argued with God, doubted, complained—and yet obeyed God all the way to the end, even to his death. His purpose, he finally understood, was to follow God, and to participate—in whatever way he could—in *God's* mission.

His story reminds us of something else, something that many leaders and ministers forget: *This journey, this ministry, this mission won't end with me.* Moses was free to retire, to die in peace, because he trusted that he had done his part and done it well, and that the mission would continue and be completed in God's time.

This reminds me of another mountaintop vision—of another prophet, who stood at the edge of the Promised Land, and saw it, and pointed others to it, but did not get to cross into it. Martin Luther King Jr, on the night before he was assassinated, said to the people of Memphis:

*"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop.... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.... 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."*

*"I just want to do God's will."* That's the desire that kept King, and Moses, going. *"God will get us to the Promised Land."* That's the vision that kept them going. That's the vision, in which they found patience to lead people through change, and courage to confront oppressive powers--resilience to get back up when knocked down, and clarity in difficult situations.

Yes, these leaders had vision. They saw beyond themselves, beyond what already is; and they trusted in God's promise of a new kingdom and a new people. They saw that they were

part of God's mission, which would always be much bigger than them. They understood their purpose: *Do God's will*.

And in case you aren't sure what God's will is, Jesus simplifies it for us even more: love God, and love your neighbor.

Where's our vision today? What do we see? Do we still know what we're about?

Without vision, without trust in God's grand vision, we're likely to make it all about ourselves—to mistake our personal ambitions for God's mission, to mistake our church buildings for God's kingdom, to mistake our agendas or programs or titles for the real purpose behind them. Without vision, we're likely to compete with each other, as we lose sight of the purpose that holds together all our particular ministries and passions. Without vision, we're prone to give up, or to never get started. Without vision, we might forget that it is God, not us, who saves, redeems, heals; we might forget where we're going, and who is leading us.

How's your vision? What do you see from the mountaintop? Where do you see God's kingdom unfolding? What do you see God doing around you, and in you, and through you? Will you point, and lead, the rest of us into that kingdom?

And should you become discouraged, or overwhelmed, take heart in God! And remember: It's not all about you. It's not all up to you. And it definitely won't end with you. Thanks be to God!