

During the summer between my second and third year of divinity school I served as a chaplain in a hospital. I had the opportunity and the blessing to be with, and to watch, many people as they died, as their life pilgrimages came to a close. Two of those experiences stand out and have followed me down the labyrinthine ways of my own pilgrimage. The first was of a clergyman who asked to see a chaplain. I walked in that room young and green and he asked me the moment I sat at his bedside, "Please, tell me how to die. I don't know how to die. Please, tell me, tell me how to die." I left that room confused and despairing and clueless; I didn't know how to tell him how to die. The second experience was of an older man surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Walking into the room there was a palpable feeling of, well, joy. There were people with tears in their eyes and smiles on their mouths. And when I walked in – young and green – they got all excited and focused. The dying man himself asked me to stand on his right and take his hand as his wife took his left hand. Then as the rest of the family joined hands and we formed a circle they asked me to pray with and for them, with and for him, with and for his death. I didn't need to tell him how to die. He already knew. I left that room elated and purposeful and, well, still clueless.

Memories of these two men, each facing imminent death, have obviously been evoked by today's scripture passage of the death of Moses. As I was praying over this passage in preparation for this sermon I was startled at the speed and clarity of these memories as they dusted themselves off and walked into my prayers. Why these? Why now?

When Moses journeyed to the top of Mount Nebo he, and the people Israel, were still in the wilderness. A reading of where he gazed and a quick look at a Bible atlas will reveal that when Moses gazed over the land he looked backward: back toward all the meandering ways of the people in Moab, back toward the path that led from Egypt. But it was not just the people Israel's journey that he beheld: he gazed at the wandering, purposeful pilgrimage that was his own life. Born with a death sentence over his head; set adrift on the Nile as an infant; raised in privilege in Pharaoh's household; murdering an Egyptian who flogged a Jew; fleeing and living as an exile, experiencing the theophany of the burning bush; rejecting and finally accepting God's call to lead the people to a land flowing with milk and honey; confronting Pharaoh; leading the slaves to freedom; wandering in the wilderness; learning from his father-in-law Jethro how to lead; losing his temper often; having the guts to talk God down

when God lost his temper and wanted to annihilate the people when they rebelled; shaping a people whose identity was, 'We are victims—slaves of Egypt,' to, 'We are the sovereign people Israel and we will assertively own our destiny;' preparing them to cross to the promised land; creating, promulgating and implementing a body of law and governance that empowered Israel to live with justice and equity; training and transferring servanthood to the next generation of leadership: Moses looked back not only Israel's watershed exodus from a life of slavery to national sovereignty, but at his own exodus from a life of personal safety to the risk of radical discipleship.

What is interesting, however, is that BEFORE Moses looked back to where he had been, the text said he looked forward, even at the hour of his death, he first looked forward to the future that he had been working toward, to the future that had been moving backward in time to reveal the horizon of God's ultimate intentions. Before Moses looked back to where he had been he looked first to the Promised Land to where Israel was going . . . without him. He always faced forward, even at the hour of death.

Moses' attitude at death was in reality a reflection of his attitude toward life. Those who truly love life and LIVE it, those whose primary focus is forward, not only accept death without sorrow, they embrace it as a friend. As the 12th century Afghan poet Rumi noted, "Everyone's death is of the same quality as himself: to the enemy of God an enemy, to the friend of God a friend."¹ Moses: friend of God, possessed no fear, just a holy gratitude to have walked the journey he walked, to have gone forward, and not to have turned back.

This is not a minor point. When God called him from the burning bush Moses did not have to say 'yes' to God. He could have walked away and in essence told God to find someone else. But like Abraham before him and Mary after him, he faced his fear and agreed to do what he was fully capable of doing, what any single person in this sanctuary is also capable of doing, however intimidating. Moses, as he looked back at his life, looked at the choices he made: to live in the risk of the fullness of the possibility that was in him or to play it safe, to face his own fear of his own potential or to quench his fear by turning his back. As philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once noted, "There is nothing of which every man is so

¹ Quoted in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton, Thomas; Image Books; New York; 1965; page 235.

afraid, as getting to know how enormously much he is capable of doing and becoming."

Part of what this story about Moses teaches us is that we are not free not to die, for die we will. We ARE free, however, to make what we will of a life that ends in death. This is, of course, one of the central points of the spiritual life: the free choice of how we will live, and thus how we will die. For the Christian there is the utter confidence that when death is accepted in the spirit of the Christ life, when one's entire orientation is to give as Christ gave, to live as Christ lived, to love as Christ loved, and even if need be to die as Christ died, when one's purpose in LIFE is truly ultimate—to want what God wants for all of creation—then our deaths are transformed into fulfillment because our LIVES have been lived in fulfillment. One conquers death by going deep and finding the courage to live to the utmost of our God-in-us potential and to spend ourselves in the larger purposes of God. Rumi said it as Muslim, Kierkegaard as a Christian, and the acerbic George Bernard Shaw said it this way: ""This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, being a true force of nature instead of a feverish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am

of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's sort of a splendid torch which I have got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

Today we gave bibles to our third graders. Again, this is not a minor point. This is not simply something that churches do for the heck of it, because churches, when they are living in the calling to which they have been called, are not sniveling, selfish clods of complaints and ailments, but rather they are the incarnation Christ on earth. Thus, when we give bibles to our children the purpose is to raise our children in that incarnational faith; in FAITH – in response to God, in response to the call of a life of discipleship which the church seeks to live out with every breath it takes. The purpose is to help them learn to embrace life, to risk God and to participate in the work of Christ. The purpose is to expose them to the master stories of scripture that shape us as a people of God. For make no mistake, shaped they will be by what they are exposed to, here and outside here, by the stories we tell them and by the images they see on television;

shaped they will be by this world and its images; shaped they will be by what is before their eyes. What is the shape of the life, and the death, we wish for our children? What is the shape of who we are as a church, as an incarnation of God on earth?

The church exists as a shaping community, as a servant community, as a messenger of the reign of God in the midst of other kingdoms, principalities and powers that attempt to shape different understandings of reality. The deliberate act of putting the biblical stories like Moses before our children's eyes, the conscious choice to shape them through this dangerous and subversive story of the people of God is our own witness to every Pharaoh and every power that we first and foremost belong to God, that we are first and foremost shaped by the Spirit, and will work along side Christ as we journey to the Promised Land where swords are been beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. And if you do not see the Bible as dangerous and subversive, then you have not read it. And its very subversive dangers are the risk-filled biblical images which we choose to shape us and which we choose for our children's shaping. It is where we direct our gaze that shapes the vision we walk toward. Moses experienced this. We are trying to experience this. And we hoping to direct our

children's gaze so they will experience this. We want our children to be looking forward to the horizon of God's promised future, and to have the courage to walk the road to get there.

If I have a wish for the quality of my own daughter's death, it will be the same wish that I have for her life: it is that at the end of her days she will not need to ask anyone to teach her how to die, for she will have spent her days learning how to live. It is that she will have embraced a purpose in her life that she deemed greater than herself and for which she expended her life energy. It will be that she had the courage to put herself in the Way of truth and not to have shied away. It will be that she has not lived to and for herself, but rather in and for the larger purposes of God. It will be that she shared her bread with the poor and her joy with the desolate; it will be that she accepted others' gifts to her when she needed them. It will be that she lived as Christ lived, loved as Christ loved and perhaps even to have died as Christ died. It will be that she embraced the master stories of scripture and chose to participate in the cost of discipleship. It will be that she chose the risk of love over the complacency of safety.

It will be that she comes to know, like Moses, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that this world can neither give nor take away.

Amen and amen.

God of life and death,

in whose hands are all the moments of our lives:

Grant us a vision of the Promised Land

(your glorious commonwealth)

so that our days may be dedicated to its upbuilding

and, when our time on earth draws to a close,

we may know that we have come faithfully to its borders.

Servant God of a servant people,

form us in your image

and reform us again and again

until we understand that we are servants

not of power, but of truth,

not of success, but of faithfulness,

not of accomplishment, but of love,

not of accumulation, but of generosity,

not of might, but of humility.