

God' Story, Our Stories

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October 23, 2011

It's not a typo. In case you were wondering, yes, we did just skip two entire books on our journey with Moses.

Last week, we ended our Old Testament reading at Exodus 33, and today we have jumped all the way to Deuteronomy 34. We've skipped over two entire books, and many chapters and verses, moving from the middle of Moses' story to the very end.

Oh, Moses. From his very beginnings, sent down the river in a basket to be found by the pharaoh's daughter, to his youth in Egypt, from his flight to avoid being persecuted for murder, to his return to free his people, and the many, many years wandering the desert, he has had a long and arduous path in life.

Moses is considered a hero of our faith, and rightfully so. Much of our understanding of ourselves as people of God come from the life and times of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt.

And today we come to the end of those days. Moses has lived 120 years, according to tradition, giving a large part of his life to shepherding God's people.

Through all the ups and downs, the doubts and fears and backtracking, Moses led the journey with all that he was. He gave of himself, often when he thought he had nothing left to give at all.

Now the people are about to enter the Promised Land, and Moses knows he will not go with them.

It's a heartbreaking to see this life's work about to be completed, knowing that the one who strove so long to see it through will not be the one to finish the journey.

And yet. And yet, isn't this just part of the human condition?

We know we are not immortal. Each one of us will see the end of our days. Each one of us will most likely have something unfinished when that time comes.

Earlier this month, Apple founder Steve Jobs passed away, and almost immediately, the internet lit up with quotes from his 2005 Commencement address at Stanford University and elsewhere.

Quotes about life, and death, and the meaning of each popped up on facebook pages and twitter accounts, and suddenly, for a brief amount of time, many who had never given much thought to their own mortality were speaking the language of eschatology.

One of the quotes that stood out for me was this: "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life." Jobs said. "It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away."

It gave me pause each time I saw it repeated by friends and acquaintances. And I couldn't help but ask myself, Are we really here on earth just to make whatever mark we can, living with the fatalistic knowledge that someday we will be cleared away to make room for something new?

Where is the hope in that?

The story of Moses on the mountaintop tells us that yes, we all die. Many of us with unfinished business at hand.

But the story also assures us of something else.

We each have a role and a purpose here in life. And God cares for each of us no matter who we are, or where our journey has taken us. Our story is not simply our story alone, but part of the bigger story of the people of God.

We are connected to each other over time and space, and each one of us has part of the larger story to tell.

God's story flows like a stream through time.

When we fail to recognize this, when we think that our lives belong to us, and us alone, the thought of our own deaths can be quite alarming. Did I achieve enough? Did I do enough? Did I make enough money, make my name large enough, make my mark bright enough on this earth?

But when we see our story as part of God's story, we know that the story does not begin and end with us.

People who have work for something larger than themselves know what this is like. Those who work for justice, or a community or the health of a congregation. They know what it's like to strive for change, to work for things to be different from how they

currently are. And many of them have known what it is to say, "I haven't seen exactly what I hoped I would get in my lifetime, but it's coming, and that's enough."

Whether we are talking about civil rights, or women's rights, the overturn of unjust laws, or unjust rules, those who tie their lives to the lives of their brothers and sisters know what it means to run the part of the race that they can, and then pass on leadership, pass on a vision, pass on a hope for what comes next.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment was to love God, and your neighbor as yourself. Maybe Jesus was speaking of this understanding that we are not just to build and create and amass for ourselves, but to reach out to the world around us, making a difference for all creation. It's certainly the way he lived.

In his book, *The God of Jesus*, Stephen J. Patterson tells us that "to love God is to love love itself." He continues, "That is why Jesus embodied love in his own life in a more radical way than the simple love of neighbor might suggest. He loved prostitutes. He loved sinners, traitors, tax collectors. He treated the shamed with honor and declared the unclean clean. He loved the unlovable. He loved his enemies. To love God is to be devoted to a basic and fundamental reality that runs through all of life and creation."

Patterson speaks of a "reality that can give life its richness and ultimate meaning." He tells us, "This is the reality that beckons us to live better than we live. This is the reality that exists as already present, an Empire 'within you,' that can be as powerful in the shaping of human life and relationships as we want it to be."

The ever-flowing stream of God's story did not begin with us, it will not end with us, but we are part of it, as it moves through history. God's story calls us to something greater than we are...the kingdom of God here on earth.

As for Moses, that one who gave so many years of his life to God's purpose, only to know that he would not live to see the end.

Luther Seminary professor David Lose says of Moses:

"He has seen that future that he will not enter into, and it is enough. Having glimpsed that, then the present's redeemed"

It is enough.

You are enough.

How often do we hear those statements today?

It is enough.

You are enough.

You are a beloved child of God, called to community with all those whom God loves.

As Lose says, "There is a way in which we have this promise about a secured future in Christ that means in a sense that we are free from worrying about achieving or striving and free to embrace the present and just be faithful and trust God with the rest."

Life is not about striving to gain all you can before your time runs out and your light goes out. Life is about connection and community, and doing our part to advance the vision that God has for this world. To share the dream that one day that kingdom will come where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So with respect for Steve Jobs, I tell you,

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet, God has offered us grace and peace for the living of our days. The knowledge and understanding that we are more than just ourselves. The comfort of community, and the gift of knowing that we are not alone on this journey.

May we each live out our days as part of something greater than ourselves, and may we come to the end knowing we have lived our part of the story that continues for all of time.

Amen.