

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
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Year A: Proper 25

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Not in my Backyard

I read an article a few years back that examined the development around Yellowstone National Park, a beautiful and rugged place where -- it turns out -- a lot of people would like to have vacation properties or retirement homes. What intrigued me about the article was not only our

capacity to spoil the pristine, but also the psychological phenomenon known as NIMBY, or Not In My Backyard. Surely you have said those words or at least felt that sentiment before. What was most interesting about this article, though, was how quickly new arrivals to the greater Yellowstone area started acting like they had been there since the prehistoric era. It only took about a year for property owners to begin acting like they owned everything there and that any other newcomers were an unwelcome burden on the “true locals.” It was as if these recently relocated owners of ranchettes were let in after banging on the door but then wanted to lock the door behind them and throw away the key.

It’s a twist on “Not in my Backyard” or NIMBY that we could call “Not in my Backyard Except for Me,” or NIMBYEM for short. I admit that it doesn’t roll off the tongue, but the phenomenon is real. I know this because I have observed it in myself bubbling up within me since we moved to Western North Carolina. I hear stories all the time like, “We tried to go to Pink Beds but it was packed. When I was a kid you never saw another soul up there.” Or, “I remember when you used to have to bushwack to go to Sliding Rock. Now there are school buses parked there all summer long and you have to pay to get in!” I won’t even get started about Dupont, the Blue Ridge Park Way, Lake Lure, and so on.

I find myself thinking these things too and looking down on all the Floridians who drive 10 mph down a mountain road, afterall, my family has been coming up here from Florida since the 1980s! We used to not even need a reservation at Davidson River Campground!

It’s easy to go there and I can’t help but wonder if this is a spiritual problem. We find ourselves thinking or saying these things often when we are inconvenienced by other people. It’s easy to look down on them as hindrances to our happiness, as roadblocks to our fulfillment. We do this with kids’ schools (watch how parents show up in full force if redistricting a school is going to allow poorer kids of color in). We do this with restaurants and towns, afterall, you can’t even park on Main Street in Hendersonville anymore! We do this with vacation destinations. We do this with our country. We even do this with church and our ministries, as we climb over the churchyard wall to get in ourselves and then join with others to build the wall higher to make

sure we're the last ones. "No," you say, "We always want new people to come, as long as they do things the way they have always been done!"

I know I find myself thinking like this when caught in apple orchard traffic or when Black Balsam is crowded or when the out-of-town mountain bikers aren't caring for *my* trails properly. Now that I have arrived, I don't need any other "newbies" taking over my spots.

Here enters Moses in our Deuteronomy reading this morning. This is actually the very ending, the final lines, of the Pentateuch -- those five books of the Torah, the Law, which are sacred to Jews and which we long believed were written by Moses himself. In our reading, we are at the end of Israel's wilderness journey. Their leader, the great prophet Moses, "whom the Lord knew face to face," our text says, had quite a journey beginning as an infant floating down the Nile to avoid genocide. Moses has by God's grace done signs and wonders in Egypt. He has delivered God's people from bondage. Following Moses, the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea as if on dry ground. Moses encountered God in the cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. He gave the people bread from heaven and quail to eat. With his staff, he struck the rock to quench the spiritual and physical thirst of his people. It was Moses who received the Ten Commandments to relay to the people a new way of life. It was Moses who hid in the cleft of the rock as the Lord passed by. And all of that was so that Moses could lead the Hebrews through the wilderness and towards the land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, where God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob might be fulfilled.

Yet in our text today, we find Moses at the top of Mount Pisgah (which I hear is getting crowded these days), and the Lord showed him the entirety of the land. This is what fascinates me and calls to me and convicts me. Did you catch this part in our reading? The Lord showed Moses the land as far as the eye could see and God said to Moses, "This the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... and I have let you see it BUT you shall not cross over to it." And the text seems to say that this is the kind of leader that Moses was. Unlike in past conversations with the Almighty, there is no negotiating this time. There is no back and forth between God and Moses. It seems that Moses' heart was full. His spirit was content.

What fascinates me about this reading is that in it we find an example of someone who knows incredible power and incredible purpose. He has access to God's very self. And yet when he has fulfilled his particular purpose, leading God's people for forty years, he is able to hand over his staff, hang up his bag, look with joy at the destination they have been working towards for four decades and walk away, trusting fully in God's providence, in God's time, in God's next leader, Joshua.

How do we grow to become people who can pour our hearts and souls into God's work and yet never think that what we accomplish or where we live or what we build is something that we own or is something of our own making? I don't think I could have walked away from the promised land after all of those years traveling towards it. What about you? Could you have given it away? I don't think I could have been buried on its borders after all that journeying, but Moses did that. He walked away from it all, happy as a clam at high tide, knowing he was being embraced by God.

Perhaps this is what happens when we seek out God's face again and again. Perhaps this is what happens when we are clear about what we are called to, both the potential and the limitations of our calling, of all we can do and all we cannot do. Perhaps this is what happens when we see ourselves as caretakers of God's world and God's people -- as stewards -- as caretakers whom God trusts with much but who understand that it's not our land we're farming, it's not our money we're making, it's not our work we are doing. The Hebrew here even says that God himself buried Moses, but no one knows where he is buried. There's no shrine to him, just this story that testifies to him, a story of generosity of self and of trust.

This guy Moses looks into his homeland for the first time. He sees it and smiles down from the heart of Pisgah and rather than saying "Not in my Backyard," Moses gives his backyard away.