

In addition to being All Saints' Day, today is the last Sunday in our "Enemies of Gratitude" series. Today's enemy of gratitude is **disappointment**. We're looking at the story of Moses' death at the very end of the book of Deuteronomy, which is the last book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), also known as the Torah. Moses has been a dominant character in four of these five books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Today's story is bittersweet. It focuses on Moses' legacy as he guided Israel from slavery in Egypt to the border of their future promised home and as it underlines God's faithfulness and tender mercy. Let us pray before the reading of God's Word. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the last chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 34, all twelve verses. I'll be reading in the Common English Bible translation.

I love a good plot twist, and here, in today's scripture, we find one. Moses, more than any other Israelite in the wilderness, has earned the chance to cross the Jordan river into the Promised Land. Yet, "Moses, so faithful, so stalwart, does not get to enter the Promised Land. After all he endured, confronting Pharaoh, 40 years in the wilderness, grumbling people, idolatry, receiving the commandments, seeing God face to face, the list goes on, he does not set one foot in the land God swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield). Seems quite unfair, doesn't it? The injustice of the situation has troubled scholars for centuries. Many have spent lots of time trying to pinpoint exactly why Moses, the "servant of the Lord," didn't get to physically cross into the Promised Land. There are several possible reasons revealed in both Numbers and Deuteronomy. One is the "misdemeanor at Meribah" where Moses failed to show God's

holiness before the people by possibly striking a rock twice instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded or perhaps in doing so Moses claimed to be the source of the miracle, rather than giving God the credit (Numbers 20:1-13 and Deut. 32:48-52). One scholar argues that Moses, as the leader of the people, is also punished for the sin of the people as it is mentioned in several places in Deuteronomy (Deut. 1:37, 3:23-27, & 4:21-22, *Interpretations*, Patrick Miller). Though in today's verses, we're only told that Moses will not cross over into the Promised Land (4b). We aren't given any more details. It is hard to discern in this entire story, however, what exactly Moses does wrong to not be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

It's easy to get sidetracked or even swept up in the seemingly graceless way in which it seems God treats Moses. While I could certainly try, I'm not going to spend the time of this sermon trying to justify God's actions. After all, God is God, and I'm not, and we don't know all of the story. "Perhaps the deeper truth here is the nature of **disappointment**, that sometimes life, even the life of faith, does not make much sense" (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Brian Erickson). I'm sure most of us, if not all of us, have experienced disappointment at some point along the way. A big event celebrating a milestone canceled. A hard worker laid off for no good reason. An eviction notice served when one has tried to follow all the rules. Faithful prayers for healing that seem to fall on deaf ears. Even the one who seems to do no wrong and colors inside the lines finds herself standing atop Mt. Pisgah, so close to what she desires but unable to attain it. Moses, as hard as he worked leading the Israelites, was only able to cast his eyes upon the whole land from atop the mountain- perhaps with a beautiful 360 degree

view. Life doesn't always lead to the outcome hoped for, does it?! And sometimes **disappointments** are due to our own sinfulness or shortfalls in our character and sometimes they just happen. This year- 2020- is often used to blame or explain away disappointing things that happen- something happens and the response may be, "Oh, it's 2020!" 2020 will likely go down in history as a year filled with many **disappointments**. "The word '**disappointment**' means what it sounds like, to miss an appointment. To have a scheduled expectation broken, a previously calendared promise erased" (Erickson). But perhaps the greater the promise, the bigger the **disappointment**?

It's difficult to practice gratitude when the thing you most want, need, desire and pray for is taken away. I was curious as to what some rabbis say about Moses' death. It turns out that many rabbis in the Jewish tradition mainly focus not on Moses' death as punishment but on the fact that he's simply mortal and what all that means for us. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, "For each of us there is a Jordan we will not cross; a journey we will not finish; a destination we will not reach. Even the greatest life is an unfinished symphony" (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/unfinished-symphony-vezot-habracha-5779/>). Moses is human and shows us how to be human. Rabbi Sacks goes on to suggest that we should not be haunted by our mistakes. That, he believes, is why the Torah tells us that Moses sinned. Sacks says, "*Because that is what it is to be human.* Even the greatest human beings in history sinned, failed as often as they succeeded, and had moments of despair. What made them great was not that they were perfect but that they kept going. They hopefully learned from their mistakes, refused to give up hope, and eventually acquired the great gift that only failure can grant,

namely humility. They understood that life is about falling a hundred times and getting up again. It's about getting up every morning and walking one more day toward the Promised Land even though you know you may never get there, but knowing also that you helped others get there" (same web site as above). Moses was special, as he knew the Lord face to face- intimately, and he reminded the Israelites, as he now reminds us, to remember what God has done for us and to see God's vision for God's people. We're told that although he was 120 years old, "his eyesight wasn't impaired and his vigor hadn't diminished a bit" (v. 7b). One might think otherwise of a person on up there in age. However, Moses kept the vision of God, though he may have misinterpreted it a few times, and that is what gave him vigor or strength. This story encourages faith not just for Jews but also for Christians.

One of the most striking uses of this text, of course, is in the speech given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated. He was in Memphis campaigning on behalf of the garbage workers, and he spoke eerily of his possible impending death. He said, *"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... 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. And I'm happy, tonight... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord"* (*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Ed. James M. Washington). "This great modern-day prophet used the story of Israel's first great prophet, for whom no other prophet in Israel had yet to emerge, to

speak of hope and faith to a people who needed both” (workingpreacher.org, Kathryn M. Schifferdecker). And this story continues to speak to us today—even in the midst of our **disappointment**. Friends, we’re called as followers of Jesus to live by faith in the God of Moses, the God who does indeed fulfill promises (Schifferdecker)...the God who is always with us...the One in whom we claim to belong whether in life or in death. The One who holds us all, the living and the dead, in His loving arms.

Standing over the border of the Promised Land, Moses, before taking his last breath, saw the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God made so long ago to the patriarchs. As the writer of Hebrews said, Moses “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [he] saw and greeted them” (11:13). Isn’t it interesting that the Torah, the primal Scripture in Judaism, ends here, just short of the climax of the story? It ends with a death, a not-yet-ness. We, too, as Christians recognize the feeling of being in a now-and-not-yet time, trusting in promises that have yet been fully realized, but living by faith nonetheless. After all, Jesus’ death and resurrection has brought victory over sin and death; nevertheless, we still live with **disappointment** and with sin. It’s the already and not yet between Christ’s first and second coming. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters in this now-and-not-yet time, we, too, live into God’s promises by loving God with every fiber of our being.

Today’s story is also a reminder that God’s mission is bigger than any one person (no matter how long a person is mourned and how significant they are in a period of history)? We are all part of something bigger than ourselves—at least we hope we are. Today, on this All Saints’ Day, we, as a

church, recognize how vast God's love is and "how thin the veil is between life and death. We remember that the church includes all who have gone before us and now are glorified as well as all who will follow, who are yet to be born. In the church we do this very odd thing of proclaiming that the dead are still a part of us, a part of our lives, and are even an animating presence in the church. Saint Paul describes the saints as 'a great cloud of witnesses,' so when they have died, we still hold them up, hoping perhaps that their virtues- their ability to have faith in God in the face of an oppressive empire or a [polarized election] or a failing crop or the blight of cancer- might become our own virtue, our own strength" (*Accidental Saints*, Nadia Bolz-Weber). Nevertheless, for we Protestant Christians saints aren't of elevated status: saints are ordinary people, living and dead, who follow(ed) Jesus: sinners standing in the need of God's love and grace. We fall down and hopefully we get back up by God's grace. We experience **disappointments**. What makes us saints of God is "not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through sinners. The title "saint" is always conferred, never earned" (Bolz-Weber). Nadia Bolz Weber is an edgy, heavily tattooed recovering addict, who happens to also be a Lutheran pastor in Denver, CO. She confesses that she has come to realize that all the saints she has known have been accidental ones- "people who advertently stumbled into redemption like they were looking for something else at the time, people who have just a wee bit of a drinking problem and manage to get sober and help others to do the same, people who are as kind as they are hostile. She continues, "What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings, all of whom are flawed." Therefore, we give thanks to God...*For all the saints who*

*from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy name,
O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia! Alleluia! (For All The Saints, vv. 1). Amen!*