

“But You Shall Not Cross Over” – Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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Since I began working among you in 2014, we’ve been blessed here to have a good crop of ministers—mostly retired—worshiping among us and contributing to our common life.

Some of them have since gone on to the church triumphant—The Rev. Jim Wilbanks, The Rev. Charlie Feast, The Rev. Les Shear. Others thankfully continue to live among us: Hal Oakley, Ron Grunke, Charles Snodgrass, John Sharp.

I feel extremely fortunate that all these guys—in ways that have never been threatening to my role here—have been and continue to serve as mentors to me through their experience, support and encouragement. And not just me. They’ve blessed all of us by sharing their wisdom and love throughout our church family.

If you asked all of them, I’ll bet they would tell you that at some point in their ministries, they were told to go—told to leave their prior places of ministry and move into either a new ministry position or retirement. Either through the voice of another human or the voice of the Holy Spirit (most likely), they were informed that their time leading a congregation or another kind of ministry had come to an end.

And I’ll also bet that, despite the prospect of a happy retirement that awaited them, they were still at least a little reluctant to make that move.

We all grow fond of our work, the connections we make, the purpose we find in leading, to the point where we're not galloping through the door eager to get out.

But inevitably, someone comes along and taps us on the shoulder, whether God or another boss, and says, "You're done." And that doesn't necessarily always feel good.

I felt that way when I left the church I served in Nebraska twelve years ago. I had re-committed to the next chapter there, excited about ministry following a pretty big building project we had finished. And I was tapped on the shoulder, and off to Tennessee I went.

Didn't feel all good, honestly. But, evidently it was time.

Moses, one of the greatest leaders of our faith, probably had no idea what was coming when he arrived at the top of Mount Nebo. He had finally gotten to the outskirts of the promised land that he had struggled for years and years to reach with the Israelites. On this day in Deuteronomy 34, the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead over here, Naphtali over there, all the land of Judah over here, the Negeb and the valley of Jericho over here.

God said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, Moses, but you shall not cross over [into it]."

Moses could have been thinking to himself, "What? I sacrificed and put my life on the line for you and for these people over all these years and I can't step into the promised land I can finally see with my own eyes? I endured threats and unrest from Pharaoh and even the Israelites themselves

to be faithful to your call on my life and you're not going to let me go into this land and enjoy the fruits of my labor?"

The time had come for Moses. He no longer was the leader these people needed. And God knew it.

We would've expected the first words out of Moses' mouth to be an emphatic declaration, "That's not fair!" And by any definition, it wasn't fair, even though that God's prohibition against Moses' entry into the Promised Land is the penalty Moses pays for disobeying God in Numbers 20.

In Numbers 20, God commands Moses to bring water to the people by **speaking** to a rock. Instead, Moses speaks to the people and **strikes** the rock with his staff, twice. Moses did not follow God's command, and God reprimands Moses, informing him that he would be prohibited from entering the land.

Still, despite this mistake, his heroic and sacrificial service would have seemed to mandate an arrival into and enjoyment of the rich land of freedom he had sought and found for God's people.

There are no recorded words of Moses after God delivers his fate. Instead, we only have a record of Moses dying, right there in the land of Moab at God's command.

While he was 120 years old, we're told, when he died, the author of the story also tells us that his vision was still in good shape and his energy was stellar ("his vigor had not abated").

So we don't know what God's thinking on this decision was—beyond this explanation in Numbers 20.

The Biblical writer, though, does go on to say things about Moses that God no doubt endorsed. In what sounds

like a eulogy, the writer says, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.”

This whole ending doesn’t seem fair to Moses. But fairness isn’t as important as God’s plan being carried out.

More than fairness, God is primarily concerned about our being faithful to the calling God has given us for the particular time we’ve been called to it.

If life were all about fairness, surely God would have allowed Moses to trudge on into the promised land despite his past mistakes, to enjoy the fruits of his labor, to take a series of victory laps around this prized territory that he struggled so much and for so long to get to. But it didn’t happen.

Instead, what was more important was honor for Moses simply in the completion of his calling just before they crossed into that land.

Moses was faithful to what God had called him to do. He struggled for God, became a leader for God, and sacrificed for God. And in the end, that pleased God and was his legacy. And right there on the verge of the promised land, his work was complete—even if it fell short of the ultimate prize.

When things don’t go right for us, when we perceive we’ve been treated unfairly—pushed out of our jobs, suffered from a debilitating illness, or suffered the loss of someone dear—God is more concerned with how we respond, how we react to that unfairness. It’s our calling to be faithful through it.

And other thing that's more important to God than fairness is our humility. In Moses' death right before entering the promised land, and in the passing of the baton of leadership to his protégé Joshua, we learn that even Moses, unequalled in the category of faithful prophets, wasn't bigger than God or God's master plan. The torch of leadership was to be passed along to the next generation without the grand old man leading the way. Might it have been a humbling experience for Moses to find out before he died that God's plan did not include his triumphal entry into that grand land?

God doesn't intend for us to suffer disappointment. And yet, the unfairness we experience, we trust, is part of a grander plan that we don't and never will fully understand.

When we lament that unfairness has planted itself on our doorstep and won't leave (being laid off, losing someone we love), we can remind ourselves that God in Jesus Christ loves us greatly. God loves us, cares for us, and weeps with us when we suffer.

In the face of unfairness, we can choose to be faithful and humble, or bitter and angry.

Brian McLaren wrote, "Through these seasons we shape a spiritual life that is deep, honest and strong. The point isn't to stay in spring or summer forever, nor is the point to get to (or through) winter as soon as possible ... any more than the point of life is advancing from infancy to old age as soon as possible. No, the point is to live each stage well, to learn well what each day and season has to teach, to live life and enjoy life and bear the good fruits of a life with God through all of life's seasons."

Not being able to cross over into the promised land is one of those seasons. But in this season, we can still bear good fruit.

"Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well." So wrote Robert Louis Stevenson.

Playing a poor hand well means being faithful and humble every day despite our disappointment. Despite our being tapped on the shoulder occasionally and told that we're no longer needed on a particular job or project or in somebody's life, we should remember that our faithfulness and our humility have brought blessing along the journey toward the promised land.

"You and I were not put on this earth or called to work in the kingdom to complete every single task for which we are equipped or to which we are called. We are men and women who serve, not messiahs; we are cooperators and contributors who do our best, but we are not a Christ. We are not destined to complete it all. The famed artist Claude Monet reportedly said, "I say that whoever claims to have finished a canvas is terribly arrogant." May we be less arrogant about finishing the canvases God has blessed us to begin, and may we be more focused on finding the Joshuas whose talents we can bless and whose artistry, beyond ours, will bless the world." (Zina Jacque, Working Preacher)