

Sermons from Park Hill: October 19, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Exodus 33: 12-23

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

“To Be Honest, I Don’t Get It”

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And [God’s] allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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 so happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Do you know who said those words? It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s last speech before he was assassinated. Dr. King was in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers who were being mistreated and underpaid by the city. He was there to stand in solidarity and lead a protest in Memphis. The night before he was killed he invoked the vivid imagery of Moses standing on the mountaintop and looking over at the land that he and the wandering Israelites had been seeking for 40 years. Dr. King wasn’t even 40 years old when he died. Moses was 120 – on the mountaintop overlooking that Promised Land.

The bizarre and inexplicable manner of Moses’ death has been debated by scholars for centuries. Why did his life end there? After all he went through, why was he, of all people, not allowed to enter? He deserved that and much more. He deserved a parade or a cake or a gold watch to retire from being their chauffeur through the wilderness, enduring their constant complaints and rebellion. What was all that debate about whether God would accompany the people or only send an angel; and then that instead of seeing God’s face, they could only see God’s behind. But changed his mind? This is all such a bewildering end to an epic story. To be honest, I don’t get it. And all my attempts to explain it sounded so lame.

It even sounds like God killed Moses. Verse five in our translation says, “Then Moses died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.” Was this a Soprano’s-style take-down ordered by

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Tony, the mob boss? Many translations say that Moses died, "just as God had said." Which sounds better, but leaves me just as confused... Why? I'm here to tell you this morning, to be honest, I don't get it.

As much as I read and read and as much as I thought and I prayed (please God, give me something to say to these folks this morning), it just seems like more evidence of God's erratic, irrational behavior of late. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but God, in the latter parts of Moses' life, sounds a bit bi-polar – one day in love with the people, the next day ready to destroy them. Moses has stepped in several times to calm God down. Isn't that *God's* job?

It's hard to keep up from passage to passage what is going on with God. Many sermons have been preached about Moses' miraculous birth, his call in the burning bush, his demand to Pharaoh to let my people go, his hand causing the sea to part and water to come from a rock... Many sermons have been preached about the Ten Commandments and the constant bickering and complaining of the Israelites. Much has been made of God's constant covenant-making with the beloved people who more often act like disappointing, disrespecting children than young people who are growing to maturity. Constantly whining, crossing the line, breaking the rules...

And get this. As soon as they finally cross over into the Promised Land, they begin worshipping the gods of all the nations around them. Maybe

it's good that Moses didn't live to see them fall down and worship idols again, after that golden calf fiasco.

Maybe God should have given up on them a long time ago. Sometimes we complain that God sounds so vengeful and full of wrath in the Old Testament. It seems like often there's a good reason for it, that God certainly had reason to be angry and frustrated.

So what should we make of these texts? What do we do with our confusion over what's fair to Moses? Or is that the point? Has this whole narrative been about Moses and the people or God and the people? It really started when God heard the cries of the Hebrews in slavery. Moses was called as an instrument of their freedom, but Moses didn't free them. It wasn't Moses' power that scared Pharaoh, but the power of God working through him. Moses had fulfilled the call to lead the people out from the house of Egypt, out of the bondage of slavery, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the Promised Land. Well done, good and faithful servant. Why did he die up on the mountain where no one could find his body? It's been suggested that it was because the people might have set up a shrine to honor *his* life instead of giving thanks to the giver of his life and the liberator of theirs. That's the explanation of most commentaries. Just between you and me, I still don't think it's fair.

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Or maybe the story's meant to remind us that the dream of freedom outlives the dreamer. That's certainly true of Dr. King. Ultimately, the dream must be passed on to others.

I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! [For] Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

What do you think? Why do you think Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land? What does this say about God? Or does this say something about us?

Though I don't understand God from moment to moment, I believe the epic story of Moses and the Israelites illustrates that the eternal nature of God is hope. I believe God's eternal, unchanging, but complex, nature is love. No relationship of love comes without misunderstanding each other. I believe that throughout the convoluted relationship of God and Israel, it is in fact God's eternal nature, what never changes, is God's desire to be in relationship. In the big picture, God seeks reconciliation, not retribution; in the end, God seeks the restoration of the covenant each time, not final revenge. Although that's what it might have felt like – punishment. And it may even feel like that at times for us too.

But, through it all, what does the Lord require of you: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

"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 so happy, tonight.