

Church in the Wild: Catching God's Vision

Deuteronomy 34: 1 - 12

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I have a long-time friend that likes to make provocative observations in our conversations.

One day he asked, "How do you feel about the fact that you are defying evolution?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you tell me that without contact lenses you would be legally blind?"

"Oh yeah. I would have no business driving at night without contacts, let alone during the day."

"Without contacts you'd be a lousy hunter. You wouldn't survive. Your faulty genes wouldn't get passed on to another generation."

"Thanks buddy."

I was thinking about that conversation a couple of weeks ago when I went to the optometrist.

You see, I've needed glasses or contacts since I was 13, but only to see far away.

My close-up vision has always been perfect.

Until this year. It seems I've reached a certain age.

I.

Moses reached a certain age, 120 years old legend has it.

But his eyesight remained perfect.

And there he is - can you see him? - after 40 years of trekking through the wilderness.

Moses has made one more hike, up, up, up from the plains of Moab.

He's still carrying his familiar staff like a walking stick.

It's worn with use and he uses it every now and then to steady his steps.

He walks into the hills of Pisgah and sets his sights on the highest peak, Mt. Nebo.

At last when he gets there, we can see that the Lord God is waiting for him, the same Lord God who watched over him as a baby floating down the Nile river; the same Lord God who spoke to him out of a flaming bush, saying, 'I choose you'; the same Lord God who crossed the sea with him, and all of Israel, into the wilderness;

the same Lord God who was Moses' conversation daily partner, the one who remained God but who could sometimes be convinced to change course.

That same Lord God is waiting for Moses at the top of Mt. Nebo.

"Look at that," the Lord said to Moses.

Moses looked to his left and saw the Dead Sea far below, 1400 feet below sea level. Beyond it he could see Hebron, the city of his ancestor Abraham.

And to his right Moses could see the oasis city of Jericho, just beyond a little thread of green, the Jordan River valley.

Moses's eyesight was so good at 120 years old that he could even see as far as the Western Sea.

"This is the land that I promised to your descendants," the Lord says to Moses as a gust of wind from the valley grazes his beard.

"But you will not cross over into it."

Many years later, rabbis debated who wrote the final 12 verses of Deuteronomy. Tradition held that Moses was the author of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. But how could he have written the last 12 verses which say, "Then Moses died there in the land of Moab"?

Some rabbis insisted that Joshua wrote them, since these verses mention Joshua and function as a handoff from one leader to another.

Some other rabbis, like ancient versions of Edgar Allan Poe, suggested that Moses wrote them, that in writing them, he came to the eerie realization that he would not cross over into the promised land, that he would instead die right there in Moab.

Either way, these verses mark the end of Moses' life, the end of his journey, the end of his years, the end of his walk with God.

But just before he dies, he gets one grand view of a future that will not belong to him.

II.

Worry about the future is the air we breathe these days.

Pandemic. Election. Economy. Racism. Wildfires.

Overlapping crises have caused many normally optimistic people to wonder, "When will we ever get through this?"

Depression and anxiety disorders are on the rise among people of all ages.

There are teenagers wondering when they can be a teenager again hanging out with friends so they can laugh and goof off and imagine their futures and enjoy the waning moments of childhood.

There are young adults who were supposed to be finding themselves, beginning careers, traveling the world, meeting partners, and now the challenges of health and finances have them staying closer to home.

There are parents balancing work and home life, as exhausted as they were in the sleepless nights following the birth of their first baby, but this exhaustion is lasting longer and with no end in sight.

And there are older adults, retirees who've had to postpone long-awaited trips, seniors balancing vulnerable health with a desire to live fully within the days at hand.

There's a woman I know in her nineties who has been in and out of hospice care for the past two years.

She's been wondering, "Why is God keeping me here? What is my purpose?"

Her final remaining joys are the brief moments she spends with her large family and her loyal friends.

And yet the pandemic has threatened to take away even those fleeting pleasures.

"I'm not afraid of dying or of being dead," she says. "I'm afraid of lingering too long."

The future does not belong to her. All that is sweet and dear in her world has now past.

III.

What did God show Moses on Mt. Nebo when all but the final moments of his life were in the past?

While Moses's sight was unimpaired, it was no match for God's vision.

God's vision sees not only what was past and what is present, God's vision is able to see into the fulfilled promises of the future.

When God showed Moses the whole land, I wonder whether God showed him how the people would cross over again on dry land, from wilderness into homeland, from promise-delayed into promise-fulfilled?

Perhaps God showed Moses the violent battles the people would endure both as aggressors and in self-defense.

Perhaps God showed Moses how they would learn to make peace agreements with their enemies, seeking to live in harmony with the people who already occupied the land.

Did God show Moses the age of the Judges, of Deborah the just judge, and of Samuel, the last judge?

Did he introduce Moses to Ruth and her great-grandbaby David; did he describe David in all his strengths and faults?

I wonder if Bethlehem came up when God was showing Moses the land – must have – you can see it from the top of Pisgah.

Bethlehem, the little shepherd town of David, the town of the prophet Micah who imagined a peaceful civilization where everyone had enough.

Bethlehem, where a child would be born to refugee parents, a child who would grow up to embody God's loving presence in the world, God's way of justice, God's decisive actions of cross and tomb which have overcome all that is violent and evil in this world.

Right before God said to Moses, "you shall not cross over there," God said, "I have let you see it with your eyes."

There on Nebo, God gave Moses a final gift, the gift of God's vision, a glimpse of the future as God sees it.

God had made and kept many promises to Moses on their journey together.

On Mt. Nebo, God fulfills God's final promise, a glimpse of homecoming, a vision of the promised land.

God's vision is not limited to the present. God's vision includes the anticipation of all promises fulfilled.

One can imagine Moses scratching out the final words of the Torah, not with feelings of disappointment and doom, but with a sense of confidence and trust.

It's the same confidence heard in the words of Dr. King's final speech to Civil Rights activist and African American sanitation workers in Memphis, working for justice and equity:

"I've been to the mountaintop... 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."

God follows through on God's promises.

The promised land is not pie in the sky.

The promised land is the kin-dom of justice and peace that God has been working to fulfill from the beginning.

The promised land is God's vision of the future, a future that belongs to God, a future that God gives to us so that we might live in and work toward the future God is creating.

IV.

I don't know about you, but I'm so glad God's vision is better than mine.

So glad that God can see into dimensions we can scarcely imagine.

Perhaps our friend in hospice can say, "I do not fear dying nor death," because God has shared with her some of God's own vision for all future life to come.

To the teenager, God shares a vision of life with friends, with adventure, with ups and downs, but with growth toward a full and fulfilling life.

To the young adult, God shares a vision of myriad opportunities to discover oneself and make a meaningful impact upon the world.

To the parent, God shares a vision of children who know they are loved, empowered by God to work hard, play hard, and care for others.

To the older adult, God shares a vision of yet more life to come, another chapter to write all the way up the mountain to our last 12 verses.

Alyssa was a cherished member of my former congregation.

She would only occasionally use her white cane to get around.

She preferred relying on her memory of a place or, when necessary, taking the arm of someone who knew how to lead her.

Alyssa was very open to talking about her disability, so I asked her one day how to describe it.

"Are you vision impaired?" I asked her.

"No, Benjamin. I'm blind. There's nothing wrong with my vision."

I think God shared God's vision with Alyssa and I think God is sharing that vision with you.

It's like putting on God's corrective eyewear so that we can begin to see things beyond that which is right in front of us.

In that sense, I think my impish friend was right to ask, "How do you feel about the fact that you are defying evolution?"

If he were to ask me that today, I would think of Moses and the Promised Land that God showed him, and I would answer, "I feel great about it."

Amen.