Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost – Proper 25A – Sunday 25 October 2020

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 / Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 / 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 / Matthew 22:34-36

Well, Moses is dead.

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What? Why just last Sunday, we were reading from the book of Exodus, and he and God were having a rousing argument about whether Yahweh would dwell among his people or not.

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And Moses won – mostly.

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He managed to get the LORD to agree to be present with the people in a real and tangible way, setting them apart from every other tribe and nation, whose deities did *not* – presumably *would* not – deign to abide in *their* midst.

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And he managed to receive a personal gift of grace; Yahweh passed by him, revealed his glory to him, and spoke the divine name to him – “name” being more than a manner of address, but including a revelation of God’s own nature and character.

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Moses did *not* manage to get a glimpse of God’s *face* – but given that God said doing so would destroy him, that was probably just as well.

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To get from there to here, we have skipped over a great many of the incidents that shape and define the Exodus story, which includes not only the book of Exodus, but Leviticus, Numbers, and the whole of Deuteronomy.

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Together, these books describe the liberative history of the Israelites, from their captivity in Egypt to their standing on the threshold of the Promised Land.

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It has been forty years since the Israelites were freed from Pharaoh’s enslavement – forty prickly, tempestuous years during which the entire adult population of those who had crossed the Red Sea died, because of their persistent rebellion and apostasy.

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It has been forty years during which, if it were not for Moses’ leadership and intercession on more than one occasion, the people would have been destroyed by God (Exodus 32:10), perished from hunger or thirst (Exodus 16:1-3; 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-5), or been killed by their enemies (Exodus 17:8; Numbers 20:14-21; 21:21-35).

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It has been forty years through which Moses has proven himself to be “a prophet unlike any other who has ever risen in Israel, a prophet whom the LORD knew face-to-face, a prophet of unparalleled strength, courage, and ‘awesome deeds’”.

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But now Moses is dead. And he has died without being able to set foot in the land to which he has so faithfully, so obediently, so valiantly led the people through four decades of trial and tribulation.

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A view of that land from the mountain top is all that he gets.

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Now – how in the world is that OK? It certainly doesn’t seem to be right. And it has bothered commentators for centuries.

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Furthermore, how in the world is it that Moses, who has argued so stridently with God about so many other things, on so many other occasions, accepts an edict which is by any reasonable standard patently unfair, without a peep?

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Well, the rabbis say he didn’t.

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The rabbis, in centuries of midrash – commentary on scripture, “filling in the blanks” – say he put up a royal stink, refusing, in the words of Dylan Thomas, to “go gentle into that good night,” but choosing, instead, to “rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”

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They note that this silent servant we see in today’s reading, surrendering to God’s decree without a word of complaint, is *not* the “right back attacha’, Yahweh” Moses we have become accustomed to; and they opine that the way in which he appears to accept his death suggests that something is missing from the story.

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As with any commentary, different rabbis have different thoughts about what his pushback might have looked like, but they all relate a wonderful, extended back-and-forth in which Moses presents a compelling argument as to why he deserves to have his life spared, until eventually God says “Enough. Stop. You will die, and that is the end of the matter.”

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A little tangent – midrash also says that after Moses finally does accept the reality of his death, Yahweh himself begins to grieve, lamenting the loss of his long-time champion and defender.

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The ancient rabbis, of course, did not have access to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’ proposition that human beings, confronted with the knowledge that they are dying, often experience some or all of five stages of grief, although Jewish tradition *does* recognize its *own* states of bereavement.

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But in the 50 years since Kubler-Ross first published her seminal work, some Jewish scholars have identified in scripture all five stages in Moses’ gradual movement toward his own death: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

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However he came to the point of his death on Mount Nebo, however, both the rabbis and most Christian commentators agree – Moses died a good death.

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He was prepared, he was peaceful, he was in the presence of One who knew him intimately and loved him; he had done good work, he had confidence in those who would carry on; he had sought, received, and given forgiveness; he had blessed the people with whom he had shared his life, including those who and troubled him greatly across the years; he was mourned.

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Dying a good death is not the same as wanting to die, but it *is* something most people, confronted with the inevitability of death, say they want to be able to do.

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Unfortunately, as has been confirmed so clearly and painfully in our own church family this week, it isn’t something that is necessarily easy to do under the best of circumstances – and it certainly isn’t something that is necessarily easy, or even possible, to do in our present situation.

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Four things brought this home last week.

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First was a conversation with a friend who announced cheerfully that she had just had her first appointment with a ger.on.to.logist, She’s a couple years younger than I am, so I was taken aback, and asked why she decided to make the shift from her current primary care doctor.

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There were a couple pieces to her answer, but the primary reason was that she wanted a doctor who had specific training in talking about age-related infirmities, end of life issues, and – how to die a good death.

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Second was a funeral – grave side service, actually – I did for a woman who had died of Covid-19. As has been the horrible case for so many of the over 220,000 people suffering a similar fate in this country, she had died isolated and tied to tubes in a hospital far from home, and her family was devastated.

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Third was conducting Prayers at the Time of Death for someone at Good Shepherd Hospital.

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It has been so long since I’ve been able to get into the hospital it was rather disorienting – it wasn’t easy to get in this time – and the empty halls, the quiet waiting rooms, the absence of visitors, all reinforced the sterile loneliness of a “not-good” death.

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Even more tragic in this case, however, was the fact that the deceased probably would not have died a not-good death Covid-19 precautions or not, as she was an angry, troubled woman completely estranged from her family and without friends.

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And fourth *was* the death of Diane Cooper’s mum, gentler than it might have been given the present restrictions imposed by the pandemic, but harsher than it might have been if Diane had been able to be at her side physically rather than electronically.

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Unfortunately, the standard for a “good death” is a little lower these days than might be hoped.

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Now I believe it’s highly unlikely that any of us are going to have a Moses-like experience in which God taps us on the shoulder and says “Look, you’re going to die today, please come up here and have a look at the future you have prepared your people to live into, and oh, by the way, I’ll bury you myself, not to worry.”

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And I’m pretty sure that dying a “good death” doesn’t mean exactly the same thing for each of you.

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But I hope you have thought about what it does mean for you, and if you haven’t, I hope you do.

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I hope you have acted on your thoughts, and if you haven’t, I hope you will.

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Whatever conclusions you do come to about what dying a “good death” means to you, there are a couple of things I’ve observed over the years that I can offer as things you might want to factor into your thought process.

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First, and this does not have ring of angels about it, but be pragmatic. Please trust me on this, both you and your loved ones will be more peaceful if none of you have to worry any more than necessary about the plague of administrative requirements associated with dying in this country.

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“Tomorrow” is *not* the best time to make sure your wills and powers of attorney are up to date, your financial and legal affairs are in as much order as circumstances allow, and someone knows where to find a list of your account numbers, policies, and passwords, hopefully up to date.

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It’s also not the best time to discuss your funeral preferences. You don’t really need to check your funeral service every time you leave town, to see if the hymns are still the ones you want – that’s a quirk peculiar to me, I suspect, and better it stay that way.

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But if you haven’t put a service together, do. Whatever we want to say about funerals being for the living – which is actually theologically suspect, but that’s another sermon – it is still your funeral.

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I can help you with *that*.

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Next, while of course you can’t dictate the presence of those closest to you, you *can* make *yourself* present to *them* in various ways. Write a letter to leave in a file for them, or make a voice recording or video – whatever you’re most comfortable with – telling your loved ones what you love about them, what you hope for them, what you pray for.

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Do good work. Even if you think you’ve made a mash-up of everything – which I highly doubt – you can start doing good work now. Remember that as a Christian, you are reflecting Christ in everything you do – your career, your extra-curricular activities, your ministries, your relationships.

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You are doing God’s work in the world with *your* hands, so do it well.

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Let go of your need to control the efforts of others, in particular those who you expect to carry your banner forward.

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Now this is wiiiiicked difficult, because their priorities aren’t quite right, they aren’t going to do things just so, and they will almost assuredly ignore some of the really important things you told them.

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(Silent smile) Just let it go. Moses had Joshua, you have – whomever, and God has a plan.

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Seek forgiveness. *Offer* forgiveness. I hope you will all live to be 120, like Moses, but starting the forgiveness thing now would be a good idea, because true forgiveness is hard and it can take a long time.

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Bless the people with whom you share your life, even those who have troubled you greatly across the years. And although doing something to facilitate another’s well being is a wonderful thing and a way of “blessing” to be sure, I mean even more than that – I mean conferring, instrumentally, a divine blessing upon them.

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You do have that power, you know.

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And be in right relationship with God. Not necessarily all warm and cozy and snug, but Moses-like. Toe-to-toe, face-to-face. Always ultimately obedient, but strong and courageous, questioning, struggling, demanding, vulnerable and intimate.

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I do hope you will all live to be 120 years old, like Moses, full of vigor to the very end.

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It would be nice to have unimpaired eyesight, too, but I think we’re all a little behind that power curve on that one.

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I do hope you all live as long as Moses, but whether or not you do, I hope you die as well as Moses.

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And I am willing to bet that’s what God hopes, too.

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God will do God’s part to make that happen – please do yours.