

John Sampson  
"Face to Face"  
Text: Exodus 34:1 - 12  
Preached at KVCC  
August 19, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

This passage that we just heard from the book of Deuteronomy may be the one passage from this book that most of us know, not because we've memorized it, but because it comes to us via Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This is the text he's thinking of when he says that he's gone to the top of the mountain, and he can see the Promised Land, and he says he may not get there, but we as a people will get to the Promised Land.

And so you might be thinking that I chose this passage to speak about race, or the state of our nation. And that makes sense because many of you indicated that you've wanted me to speak about our country during our summer series that I'm calling Extraordinary Time. During this series we're reflecting on how God's presence in our lives isn't saved only for special times, and special places, for mountain top experiences. But that God's spirit runs through all of the ordinary nooks and crannies that define our day-to-day experiences.

In the list of the subjects you've wanted me to speak about the most popular categories were, as I mentioned, this historical moment in our country's history, and forgiveness. And we've reflected on both of these subjects. But there were other subjects that only got a vote or two. And I'd like to share one of these with you this morning.

And I'm astonished when I think that this subject only got one vote. Only one person asked me to speak about this issue.

It's the issue of accepting the challenges we face as we age.

I'm astonished that only one person in our entire congregation held aging up as a subject of reflection because if you look at us as a congregation we skew to a more mature demographic, which is not to say that we are not an energetic, healthy, and engaged congregation.

More importantly I am surprised that only one person asked me to share my thoughts on this subject because all of the multifaceted challenges, and joys, of aging, are so central to the lived experience of many of us here today.

Sometimes we share these challenges in fun, in a joking manner. We talk about our aches and our pains, and we dismiss them with a laugh, confessing that's what happens when you get to 60, or 70, or 80. I remember not too long ago when I tried to get off the floor after a children's sermon, and I made some kind of moan or groan, some here that morning broke out in laughter. And that's OK. I laughed too.

But there are other challenges aren't there?

There are significant changes we experience in our bodies, and in our cognitive abilities, as we age that go to the core of who we are as people.

Now today I am not thinking so much of the conditions that can make the most radical changes in our lives such as Alzheimer's, Huntington's disease, and other serious conditions. I am thinking about the more common changes we may experience that test the way we understand ourselves.

For example:

No longer can we walk up and down stairs as we used to, and it makes us question whether or not we can remain in the house we've loved so much, and has such wonderful memories for us.

We just got in an accident in our car, and we realize it's not safe to drive anymore. And we're left to contemplate a dramatic change in our independence, and our self-sufficiency.

For most of our lives we've been the providers and caregivers for our children, and now we find we need to rely more and more on our kids to help us do things around the house, make sure our finances are in good shape, and maybe do some basic things such as bathing and eating.

Aging, at a certain point, causes us to question the deepest understandings we have about ourselves, our worth, and what we want out of our lives in our final years.

I chose our reading today, not because I think it speaks to the struggles of our nation, but because I think it illuminates the struggles of our aging. And I think it shows us how something as ordinary as aging is the extraordinary location of God's continued promise of Presence in our lives.

The book of Deuteronomy is the final book of the Torah, the first five books of our Bible. In many ways it is the story of Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, coming to terms with the final movement in the extraordinary symphony of his life. After being called by God and leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, receiving God's law on stone tablets, and shepherding the people through the desert to the land God promised their ancestors, Moses comes to the brink of attaining his life's work and is told by God that he can see the Promised Land, but like Martin Luther King, he won't attain it himself. This is due to an

earlier episode in which Moses doesn't show God the proper respect when performing a miracle.

In Deuteronomy, in the record of the final moments of his life, Moses puts his affairs in order. He identifies his successor, Joshua. He reiterates God's law to the people. He brings the Israelites to the border of their new home. And now he has to let it all go.

Where he was the leader of the people, he has to accept that there is a new leader with a new mission that will take skills and strengths he no longer has. And he has to let go.

Where Moses relied on the strength and stamina of his body to cross deserts and wastelands, he has to accept that his body won't last forever. And he has to let go.

Where he has worked and planned his whole life to get his people to the Promised Land, he has to accept he will never realize the greatest hope of his life's work. And he has to let go.

There are some who think that the stories of the Bible can seem remote, and disconnected from our modern lives. And I get where that kind of critique can come from. But this story of Moses and his last days sits right in this room this morning. This story of Moses accepting the great accomplishments, but also the profound incompleteness of his life, may be in some of our hearts this morning.

How do you hear this story of Moses and his final days?

I was speaking to someone in our congregation about this story and I said I thought it was bittersweet, for all of the reasons I've been sharing. I told her I wondered what Moses must have been thinking as he stood on that mountain looking out to the land that God denied him. And she said to me something like, "Oh Moses would be fine. He obeyed God his whole life, and now he'd accept God's judgment that he wouldn't enter the Promised Land. He'd obey God to the end." It's a paraphrase, but that's the gist of it.

I find this idea of obedience to God to the end of one's life fascinating. It's certainly there in the text. But I am not sure I considered the implications of it when I had thought about the reality of aging, as we experience it in our own lives, here today.

As Moses stands on that mountain, knowing he's been superseded by a new leader, knowing he'll never enter the Promised Land, even though he spent his whole life working towards it, knowing that his life is coming to its literal end, he doesn't resist. He's able to look out, and I like to think his heart is filled with deep joy for his people, and a great sense of accomplishment in the part he played in God's plan for her chosen people.

And I think the key here is this idea of obedience, of active acceptance of where one is in life, of the limitations of that place, and of the realistic possibilities of what lies ahead.

When I think of those of us who struggle the most with certain aspects of aging I often feel that the real struggle is the struggle of acceptance of how we are changing, how the

physical reality of our bodies are changing, how our self image is changing, how our independence is changing.

We don't continue to live in our house of 50 years, even though we fall time after time, because we like falling. We hold on to that house because of what it means to us, and our image of ourselves, and we find we can't let go of that image, because we fear we would be letting go of who we are.

We refuse to give up our car not because we don't understand that we keep getting in accidents. We refuse to give it up because it means we're no longer self sufficient, we're no longer who we believe ourselves to be.

We refuse to stop talking about our college days that happened over 70 years ago, not because they were so great, but because we are trying to process what they mean to our own identity.

As we age it is normal and right to have to make heart-wrenching decisions that will change our self-identities. But we have a choice of how we will make these decisions. Will we stay in fear and refuse to move ahead in the transformation that aging calls us to? Or will we accept the invitation and let go of our understanding of ourselves and become the new people God is calling us to be? Because God is still calling us to new life, newly defined life, at 60, at 70, at 80, 90 and 100.

From a developmental perspective when we can process our histories, and accept our place along the spectrum of aging, letting go of old understandings of ourselves, and replacing them with more appropriate self-images, we free the energy of our minds and our hearts to share with others our wisdom, and support for the living of their lives, just as Moses did with the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

It's only when Moses accepts his life is entering the final stretch that he consciously and deliberately shares his memories of his experience of God on Horeb with his spiritual children so that they can have fruitful and productive lives in a new land.

It's only when we have accepted where we are on the aging spectrum that we often begin to consciously and explicitly share our stories and histories with our children, and their children.

And it's in this acceptance that there is the possibility of love breaking forth. Love the power of connection and relationship that overcomes the powers of isolation and solitude, which so often haunt the older members of our community.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this reflection, only one person offered this subject up for consideration. But like forgiveness, or the state of our nation, aging is such a complex and multivalent subject. It's a subject we will revisit, and reconsider from many perspectives, over time. Because it is a subject that profoundly impacted Moses standing there on the Mount Nebo, and it is a subject, which sits here in our pews this morning.

Amen.