

North Kildonan United Church

25th October 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Way of Moses”

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

I Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Matthew 22: 34-46

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

"Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated."

Today we are at the end of the life of Moses, but for a moment let's cast our mind back to the beginning of his life.

Moses was born in a dangerous time. Pharaoh, feeling threatened by the Israelites in Egypt, had decreed that all Hebrew boys were to be drown in the Nile. What was a mother to do?

Months ago we heard how his mother placed the infant Moses into a waterproof basket and hoped for the best as she floated him down the river.

What thoughts, what dreams must she have had for her son as she let her beloved loose, out of her hands but certainly not out of her heart.

As chance would have it, the boy in the basket was recovered and presented to Pharaoh's daughter. Through some clever suggestions, Moses's sister, who had been diligently watching over her brother, arranged that Moses's mother would care for this seemingly abandoned boy.

In time, Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses as her own and he became a prince of Egypt.

And what a life Moses was introduced into. We, all these centuries later, are able to catch glimpses into the wealth of those times whenever we see the treasures discovered in the tombs of the Pharaohs. These were the days for the ruling class of Egypt and Moses was entitled to all the opulence and fine dining of the royal court. And though she was physically separated from her son, Moses's mother must have rested easy, knowing that her boy, now a man, was safe and secure and blessed beyond measure in material goods and privileges.

Moses could have stayed in the royal court, abided by the rules of the royal court and turned a blind eye to the mistreatment of the Hebrew slaves all around him. But there was more to Moses than just being a playboy son of an Egyptian royal. There was

within him a sense of justice and fair play, a sense that compelled him to intervene when he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian. Moses kills the Egyptian, an act that soon leads to his escape to Midian.

Life in Midian would be different than Egypt, but different in a good way for Moses. He would become a shepherd, marry and have two sons, live a life free from court intrigue and gossip, able to enjoy God's green pastures, living in harmony with the universe. His mother could rest easy, knowing that her boy was safe once again.

But then, the third phase of his life begins. Moses is shepherding his flock when he encounters the burning bush. God is speaking to him in the bush, calling him to return to Egypt, not as a prince, but as a prophet, as the instrument of God to lead God's people to freedom. This was perhaps not the future his mother had in mind for her beloved son.

God and Moses argue back and forth. Moses presents his reasons why he's clearly not the person for this job, and God refutes the reasons. Finally God refuses to take no for an answer and Moses is back in Egypt.

The tranquility of the shepherd's life is gone. He goes back to Egypt not as a prince but as a Hebrew troublemaker for a stubborn and cruel Pharaoh.

For forty years Moses struggles first with Pharaoh, then with his own people. Frustration, anger, and disappointment are daily components of life for Moses, leading Moses to at one point say to God, *"if this is how you are going to treat me, just kill me now. I've had enough."*

The Exodus account is a tale of one frustration after another, one complaint after another, more misunderstandings than understandings. *"There is no food, and when there is food it's no good, the water is bitter, when we can find it, we walk and walk and walk and get nowhere"* you can almost hear the people say.

It's an account of disobedience and ingratitude to God. The first chance the people get, they craft for themselves a Golden Calf, an idol they can worship, in defiance of the Lord God who led them to freedom.

If we were doing a forty year job review of poor Moses, chances are we might say his interpersonal skills were lacking, his attention to scheduling a bit shoddy, and basically his work was more or less a failure. Certainly in worldly terms he wasn't so successful, he didn't smoothly achieve the job description given by God. But that's in worldly terms.

In spiritual terms he most definitely was successful. Our lesson affirms that.

"Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel."

Moses may not have been able to see all that he had accomplished but he is regarded as the greatest leader in Israel's history. And in a sense he joins that massive list of other great people who, during their lifetimes, were not able to see, to realize, their importance.

Think of J. S. Bach, one of the world's truly great composers, who during his time was not regarded that way by the musical community or even his own family. Van Gogh only sold one painting. Emily Dickenson had only ten poems published. The list goes on and on. We never know what will happen to what we leave behind, including our place in people's hearts.

One of the few times when such an assessment is done, of what we have left in the hearts of others, is at a funeral or memorial or celebration of life service.

For thirty-five years I have been conducting funerals, more often than not for individuals I did not know. The visit before the funeral with those left behind is an important time to remember and to put into some kind of context the life of the deceased.

To help me catch a glimpse of the life of the person, I will ask questions, read the obituary, see photos or documents or whatever the family feels would be helpful.

For most people, their life story might be divided into the virtues of what they did and who they were.

What they did is often work related or connected to offices they held in organizations or some particular achievements they were proud of. While such details are significant, they are perhaps not really what constitutes the essence of the person.

Who they were is the core of the person's identity. How were they as a family person, as a sibling, spouse or other relative, or a friend, or a neighbour or co-worker or fellow volunteer or member of a congregation? What memories were made with this person over the years? How did this person make you feel when you were with them? What values did the deceased live by and how did they contribute to the health and well-being of their family, their faith community, their neighbourhood? Were they kind, and how did they show kindness to others? Were they generous, loving, helpful...the list goes on. Who, in your opinion, was the deceased?

These are the enduring virtues that speak of the humanity of the person, much more so than how long they worked wherever it was. And they are virtues, not judgements. None of us knows what another person carries within them, and sometimes the hurt or confusion is too great for that person to fully and freely share their life with others.

Nor do we ever fully know the impact we have had on the lives of others, the positive or not so positive influence we have been, the blessings we have unwittingly bestowed on those we love, the memories made through the years that allow us to live on in others after our mortal life has ended.

To return to Moses. By worldly standards, many of us might be judged, or even written, off for not being successful or wealthy or influential. But by the standards that truly count we may be remembered more importantly as being loving and giving and kind; a wonderful parent and partner, a loyal and helpful friend and neighbour, an honest, forgiving person of faith, a servant of the Lord.

Moses was described as a servant of the Lord, and that is where his greatness truly was to be found. Moses's life was a life of service. He never sought personal rewards or accolades. He was an ordinary person through whom extraordinary things happened.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sums up Moses this way: *"What Moses taught us is that we are as big as the space we create within ourselves for people other than us, causes bigger than us, ideals that make the world a more just and gentle place; what makes us great are the principles by which, and the causes for which, we live"*.

How desperately we need to see the embodiment of that spirit, that wisdom, in public life, both in Canada and beyond our borders.

Moses has inspired countless visionaries, prophets and leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. On the night before he was to lose his life, Dr. King spoke of the last day of Moses's life, when the man who had led his people to freedom was taken by God to the mountaintop from which he could see in the distance the land he was not destined to enter. Dr. King felt the same way. That night he said:

"I just want to do God's will. And he'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." The next day he was assassinated.

In an earlier sermon Dr. King preached:

"Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You do not have to have a college degree to serve. You do not have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

The way of Moses shows us that it is right to fight for justice even when it seems impossible. It is to believe that God is with us in our struggles and that our example matters and influences others. It is to realize that we rarely live to see the full impact of our lives. It is to do right because it is right, to be honourable and responsible, to be, in the words of Deuteronomy, a servant of the Lord. And in so doing, we are also walking in the way of Jesus Christ.

As Rabbi Sacks says: *"Life is the opportunity to serve. The rest is commentary. Go and do. Go and teach. Go and heal. Go and be a blessing."*

Amen.