

September 1, 2019  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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## BEFORE SUMMER ENDS: Living With Our Incompletions

Introduction to the text

The conclusion of Deuteronomy is rather surprising. It is a story of conclusion and incompleteness. Instead of Moses, the great mouthpiece of God and motivator of Israel, triumphantly leading the people into their new life in the Promised Land, Moses is suddenly taken from the scene. The irony is severe: Moses, God's instrument of Israel's deliverance, dies without ever setting foot in the Promised Land. The story is punctuated with poignancy. Moses is granted a glimpse of his life's goal, but he is not granted fulfillment of that goal.

### Deuteronomy 34:1-11

[1] And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, [2] all Naph'tali, the land of E'phraim and Manas'seh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, [3] the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zo'ar. [4] And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there."

[5] So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, [6] and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-pe'or; but no man knows the place of his burial to this day.

[7] Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. [8] And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. [9] And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him; so the people of Israel obeyed him, and did as the LORD had commanded Moses.

[10] And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, [11] none like him for all the signs and the wonders which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land,

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives, speak your eternal Word to us, that we may respond to your gracious promises with gratefulness, faithfulness, service and love. Amen.

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### INTRODUCTION

Something I lament is the end of summer. Gone are the long spans of daylight. Sunrise is later. Sunset comes earlier. Gone are the blissful moments of frolicking by the shore. **But, more so, the end of summer somehow reminds me of life's incompletions.**

Life as good as it is, is full of unrealized dreams, unfinished tasks, incomplete plans, unfulfilled hopes. There is a great deal of life spent on the verge, at the door but not over the threshold, tethered to yesterday, unable to possess tomorrow. In other words, something remains to be done; the job is still undone.

I could have rummaged about the Bible and come up with a message about achievement, accomplishment, progress; conventional American sermons fare. But today I have listened to the Bible, to the ancient Book of Deuteronomy and heard a word about life's unfinished business.

Of all the fruitless and frustrating outcomes for a good and faithful person like Moses, this had to be ranked among the worst. Moses had dedicated forty years to the "promised land project." To do it, he had left behind a good job and a well-settled life with his family on the basis of a conversation with a burning bush. Notwithstanding, whatever misgiving he had, he went to Egypt.

There he had to "sell" the whole exodus idea. He had to sell it first to the Hebrews, for whose sake it was supposedly taking place, but who were skeptical. Pharaoh reluctantly acquiesced, persuaded, primarily, by some pretty unsettling plagues. There was nothing smooth about the Exodus adventure.

Forty years Moses struggled with a recalcitrant people; forty years he dwelt in tents and lived off the land; forty years he was a pilgrim and sojourner. And all to one end: that he might reach the promised Land! Here they are, at the edge of Canaan, poised to enter and realize the dream that had sustained Moses. Moses is told that he is NOT going to make it all the way.

Apparently, all he was going to get for his trouble was the aches and pains of a rugged existence in the wilderness; memories of dealing with people who seemed impossible to please—and that one tantalizing glimpse, from a mountain across the river.

All the dreams that led him onward, are going to remain unrealized, and now he has to let go of them.

The deprivation of "promised lands," the capricious unraveling of legitimate fulfillments and hopes, happens in all kinds of ways. We all have to deal with disrupted plans, deferred hopes and unrealized dreams. Incompletion, though not an ideal, is an inevitability.

The unpleasant reality is that even the most authentic, good, and well deserved "promised lands" sometimes end up being denied us for no other reason than the complexity of conditions, the randomness of direction, or the limits of time that are part of our human circumstances.

A great deal of human existence is spent on the verge, at the door but not over the threshold, tethered to yesterday, unable to possess tomorrow. Life is an accumulation of decisions that could have been made differently, baggage called regret, faces you will not

see again, words that came out wrong, things that don't work out as planned. Much of the business of life is unfinished business and obsessive second guessing leads to moral paralysis.

I suspect that there is no greater test of faith than to recognize and accept these points in our lives—and then to "let go" to a higher dimension of trust. This is actually a place, unlikely as it may seem, where glorious discoveries come—my weakness and God's strength—my discouragement and God's promise—my loneliness and God's presence—my hurt and God's grace.

This Sacrament...

So the word to you today from this epic of incompleteness is, relax. God's purposes for the world are not utterly dependent on your getting it right. You can go ahead and live, not knowing how it will all turn out, not having to make it all turn out. Every person's life is a diary in which time and time again he/she means to write one story and is forced to write another. Confronted by our incompleteness we may re-cast the vision, re-arrange priorities, re-order thinking, re-set convictions in keeping with God's design.

Moses could tell us, only God knows where it all leads, what it finally means. We are the story God writes. God only knows. We therefore live in the conviction that God really does put us to good purposes, even though we may not enter the promised land of concrete results and visible fulfillment in our exodus from here to there.

Closing prayer

Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may the Spirit of God rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.