

Matthew 22:34-40

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

October 29, 2023

## **Even If We Don't Get There**

Over the course of this month, our Stewardship committee has been doing a wonderful job with their video series about why we pledge and give and what our gifts do and can do for our church, our community, and the world. It has all culminated to what we call Consecration Sunday today-the day where we are asked to officially make our commitments of time, talent, and resources for 2024 if we have not done so already. So earlier this week, Derk Johnson came into my office, and as we chatted about Consecration Sunday, he said to me, "And you're going to give an inspiring sermon that's going to make people get up and clap and double their pledges and get them all pumped up, right?" (Derk, that might be an exaggeration of what you said, but it was essentially that). No pressure AT ALL there. 😊

What I didn't have the heart to tell him in that moment is that I had already selected which lectionary text I would be primarily preaching from and that it was about Moses dying on a mountain. In fact, I'm sure the Stewardship committee along with you all are wondering why I chose to focus on this text even over the one about loving God and neighbor, which would make more sense for a stewardship focus and for all that's going on in the world right now. But bear with me, because I do think God is calling us through this scripture focus today.

Because you and I, we all, are on a journey of faith. Yes, we are all at different points in the journey and I'm fairly certain that the path has taken us on some mountaintop highs and into some valley lows, through arid deserts and rivers of life and joy. If we know the story of Moses, we know that he too, has been on quite the journey of highs and lows. From the time of his birth, saved by midwives who deliberately disobeyed the powers that be, to being set to float down a river and saved by the Pharaoh's daughter, raised as an outsider, then to exile, and then reluctantly, very reluctantly, standing up to the corrupt power of Pharaoh and leading people out of slavery. And that was just the beginning of his life. The journey continued for the next forty years through the desert wilderness with manna from heaven, water from a rock, parting a sea, and coming off a mountain changed with the ten commandments. Forty years through desert wilderness where I am sure he had doubts, real fears, moments of joy, and all with the hope and faith to get to them all to the Promised Land.

And then in our reading today, he gets there. Almost. He gets to see it. But he does not get to cross over into it. Can you imagine what that might have felt like? He has led the Israelites for forty years, out of slavery in Egypt, through all the ups and downs and trials and tribulations, and now they together stand at the edge of the Promised Land but he will not enter there. There's a whole story about why that is, which I will not get into right now, but Moses knew he wouldn't get to cross over at this point.

Moses is in a "now and not yet" time. He's not going to finish what he started. Growing up, my parents taught me that it was a value to finish what you start. In fact, it was a higher value to finish what you started than doing well at it. And I do think it's a good value to teach and encourage folks to complete the task that they've begun. But you and I know that sometimes that does not happen for a variety of reasons. Hearing this piece of Moses' story I'm sure resonates with some of you too—you too know something of disappointment and dreams or goals unfulfilled. You might know a little of what Moses might be feeling right now, living in a "now and not yet" time, trusting in promises that have not yet been fully realized, but living by faith anyway.

It's hard when you follow God's call, try your best, you can see it and almost taste the victory and fulfilled promise, and then know that you cannot see it through to the end.

I think we can have two responses to this story and this reality of life. One is to throw our hands up in the air and give up and say it's not worth it. But I'm not going to entertain that possibility for us for very long because I believe to my core that living a life with purpose, call, and hope for better...for the upside down kingdom of God here on earth is valuable and worth it, even if we do not get to see it all the way through. And so might it be that Moses learns and teaches us that none of us is going to complete the tasks that build that upside kingdom of God?

Friends, in these days of war, mass shootings and continued loss of innocent lives, the work that we are called to do—to bring God's vision of love with justice and peace and hope and joy to earth is not one that we can put aside. It is imperative that we each do our part where we are. But can we let go of the desire to control the outcome and trust that the work we are each called to do now matters? And maybe even harder for us to accept, can we believe that it's okay to not complete the task? Can we do this work while thinking not only of ourselves but also of the future generation that will come after us? As a church contemplating what we pledge to give for the next year, can we think about what our joint efforts can produce together not only for ourselves but for those who will come after us?

It's not the popular method and way our society thinks about giving nor how it thinks about how we succeed. According to the Alban Institute if I wanted to give a "successful" pitch to you all right now, what I'm preaching is not it. To have a successful pitch, I need to show you how your gifts will get you the kind of programming you want. I would need to publicly recognize the big givers so as to encourage folks to follow in their footsteps. Or I need to emphasize that God will bless you if you bless the church-that's why prosperity gospel preachers are usually successful when it comes to members giving. NPR had a story that said millennials will not respond to giving out of a sense of obligation or when the word "donation" is used, but that they will give when they see their gifts will be invested in changing the world. Knowing the plan, the vision, and the difference it will make makes the difference in giving.

I did ponder these methods, but today, friends, I decided I would continue to trust that upside down method that Christ taught so frequently. Even if we do not get to see the full outcome, can we do the work Christ calls us to do not only unto ourselves or for ourselves?

Biblical scholar Zina Jacque writes, "How would the work of the church, indeed, the world's work, shift on its axis if human beings strove not to succeed in their own name, for their own fame, or at all costs? What would happen if our ultimate goal was something other than completing every task? What if we each spent more time looking for and encouraging our Joshuas and less time making sure we are the ones whose names are listed as the final hero of the story? What would be different about your life, my life, and our ministries if we were less focused on leading institutions to victory and more focused on ensuring sufficient bench strength within the institution?"

Friends, this text tells us of our futures, ones we will not inhabit but will surely shape. And I know that telling you to give or pledge or share of your gifts and talents for those yet to walk in through the doors of Stone Church isn't a popular strategy, but can we consider it? Can we remember that what we do is also for what we are still building, growing and seeking for those who come after us?

Moses will not complete the journey through the Exodus with a triumphant entry into the Promised Land. Even though today's scripture reading describes him as a prophet without equal, he is still stopped short of finishing what he started. And there is something in the limitations put on Moses that might be life-saving for those of us who serve God and for the church today. To let go of the pressure or idea that we have to do it all, because we don't.

Because Church, even if we don't get there, we will still praise the living God  
Even if we don't get there-we will continue to show up for each other, to see the  
humanity in one another and to help others who have forgotten do the same.  
Even if we don't get there, we will continue to advocate for a society and culture of  
non-violence, love with justice, for peace.

Even if we don't get there, we will do the challenging work to rid of all of the isms  
that are engrained in us that block us from truly loving one another, so that all may  
know love.

Even if we don't get there, we will share the stories of Jesus and our lives with our  
children and all those who long to hear good news of God's love.

Even if we don't get there, we will continue to proclaim the truth of the radical love  
of God that seeks upside down kingdom where the last shall be first and the first  
shall be last.

Even if we don't get there, what we do today still matters. It matters a lot. Can you  
and will you believe that this day? What will you commit to, even for an unknown  
future or outcome?

Friends, I want to conclude with what is commonly known as Oscar Romero's  
Prayer, but was written in 1979 by Ken Untener that summarizes well what I  
believe God is saying to us through this passage today. He writes,

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only  
beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only  
a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is  
complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No  
confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program  
accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes  
everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further  
development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We  
cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This  
enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

And so friends, let us plant and water seeds, let us use our voices to speak of justice and liberation and peace, let us go up on that mountaintop and wade through the valley lows, let us share the good news of amazing grace and abounding love, and even if we don't get to see it all through, let us rest in the assurance that our efforts today matter for all that God is already doing in us and through us. May it be so. Amen.