For All the Saints
by Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Today is All Saints' Sunday, the Sunday in the liturgical calendar where we honor the saints who have gone before us, especially those that have passed away this year. It is a day that holds the tension of grief and hope. We are no longer physically with those whom we love, but we are so grateful for the gift of their life and witness to God's love.

On the night of April 3, 1968, one such saint, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Preached a sermon at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. He had come to the city to stand with Black sanitation workers who were protesting low wages and dangerous working conditions. From the pulpit, he said these words:

> *"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. 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 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."*[1]

The next evening, he was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Martin Luther King knew that he would not live to see the day he had spent his whole ministry preaching toward. He fervently believed the day of civil rights would come. And he also seemed to know that he would most likely not be alive when it arrived. So, he did what faithful preachers have done for generations: he preached hope to people who would have to walk the rest of the way without him.

In our scripture reading this morning we find Moses at the very end of his life. He has led the Israelites through the wilderness. He bravely stood before Pharoah, demanding that he free God's people. He stretched out his hand over the Red Sea, allowing God to save the Israelites. He climbed Sinai and came down with the tablets, teaching the Isrealites how to live in covenant with Yahweh. He interceded for Israel again and again even when they grumbled and doubted and built golden calves. Moses is at the end of his long ministry career. He has been wandering in the desert with God's people for forty long years.

Now God brings him up Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho, and shows him the whole land: Every hill and valley the people have been dreaming about there before his eyes: The promised land.

And then God says, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

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[1] https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm

Moses stands at the edge. He can see everything his life has been leading toward, but he cannot go in.

Why? Scholars and readers of this text have never really agreed because the scriptures contradict themselves. Some point back to the book of Numbers, to the day at Meribah when Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, and they read his exclusion as God's judgment on that moment. Others point to Moses' own words earlier in Deuteronomy, where he says that the Lord was angry with him on account of the people, as though Moses bears the weight of Israel's sin. Still others simply call it a mystery.

His whole life led to this point, and he doesn't even get to lead the people into the Promised Land. Unfair isn't even a word strong enough to describe this feeling.

And this is not just unfair for Moses- Israel has been walking alongside of Moses this whole time. In the wilderness they have been learning how to be God's people: how to worship this God who brought them out of Egypt, how to live in relationship with the God who made covenant with them at Sinai.

And through it all, Moses has been the face of that relationship. He has been the vessel by which they came to know Yahweh, the God of Israel, to understand this God's grace, provision, and teaching. When manna fell from the sky, Moses was the one who told them what it was. When water poured from the rock, Moses was the one holding the staff. Our reading tells us there has never since arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, "whom the Lord knew face to face."

Losing Moses is devastating for them. It is unfair that he will not walk with them into the very place his life's work was aiming toward. There is pain and grief felt in the deafening silence of his absence. They do not know what it means to move forward without him. Scripture tells us that the Israelites wept for Moses for thirty days.

That is what grief does to us too. When we lose the people we love, there is an empty seat in our lives. An empty chair at the table. An empty spot in the pew where they always sat. A phone number we still cannot bring ourselves to delete. There is a huge gap, and into that gap rushes anger and confusion and the deep sense that this is not how it was supposed to go.

I find it interesting that the scholars cannot agree on why Moses was not allowed to enter the land. I think that disagreement points to something we all experience in grief.

When we lose someone, we love, we try to make the math work. We try to find the A plus B that equals C. We search for some reason why that person died, or why it happened then, or why it happened to them. And so, we reach for phrases that might make us feel better: "Everything happens for a reason." "God needed another angel." "It must have been part of God's plan."

We say these things because silence in the face of death feels unbearable. But so often those phrases are simply not true, and they can wound the very people they are meant to comfort. **Life is not linear. Nothing about losing people we love makes sense sometimes-it can be just plain unfair.** We are not given an explanation when we lose someone. But we are given a promise, that God will not and has not abandoned us or our loved one.

Our reading describes a grieving community stuck in the in-between that grief presents. They do not know how to take the next step forward without the one that had been their guide, their teacher, their provider. But it was more than that. Moses' life pointed beyond itself to God.

And that is what the saints of our lives do too. Think for a moment of the people you are carrying in your heart this morning.

A grandmother who taught you to pray at the edge of your bed. A Sunday school teacher who knew your name and asked about your week. A friend who sat with you in a hospital waiting room and did not need to say anything. A parent whose love showed you that you mattered, and that you were precious in God's sight.

Their lives showed us what love looks like. Their lives showed us what grace looks like. They were not perfect; any more than Moses was perfect. Our saints had their own failings, and we loved them anyway. We do not call them saints because they earned it. We call them saints because the grace of God claimed them in their baptism and worked through their ordinary, imperfect lives, so that when we look at them, we catch a glimpse of God.

So, how do we, like the people of Israel move forward this All-Saints' Sunday without our saints physically with us anymore?

Shortly after the death of Moses, we are given a new character in God's story. Joshua. Scripture reading tells us that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, continuing to do as the Lord had commanded Moses."

The story does not end at Moses' grave. Someone has to pick up the work. Someone has to lead the people across the river.

This is our work as those who have been left behind. We are not asked to become the people we have lost. Scripture is clear that there will never be another Moses, and there will never be another one of the saints we are remembering today. But we *are* asked to be the Joshuas. We are asked to carry forward the ministry they showed us, the ministry that points to a God who delivers, a God who is full of grace and mercy, a God who empowers us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And we do not carry it alone. Just before this passage, Moses tells Joshua, "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

All Saints Sunday holds two things together. It can be a sad day, because it reminds us of the pain and the confusion and the anger that live inside grief. It reminds us that the people we love most are no longer here with us.

But it is also a day of deep hope. The ministry these saints showed us will come to fruition. They may not see it. We may not see it. And still we carry on, the way people to this day have carried on Dr. King's ministry and his work of justice, decades after the night he told them he might not get there with them. This is our work. To be the Joshuas. To carry on the activism of John Alexander, the love of teaching like Janette Scott, the joy of Laura Jean McClintick, the steadiness of Marilyn Benton, the resilience of Steve Nelson, the deep care of Vangie Jagaard, the creativity and curiosity of Oliver Feldman. This is our work. This is how we move forward. Empowered by their very legacy in our lives.

Archbishop Oscar Romero once wrote: *"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… We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise… 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."[2]

Moses was a prophet of a future not his own. He led the people for forty years toward a land he would only see from a distance. Dr. King was a prophet of a future not his own. He stood on the mountaintop in Memphis and told the people he might not get there with them. The saints you are holding in your heart this morning were prophets of a future not *their* own. They planted seeds they never saw bloom. They watered seeds that others had planted before them. And they trusted the master builder to finish what they could only begin.

May their lives continue to be a witness to the love of God manifest in our daily lives, each and every day.

[2] https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/archbishop_romero_prayer