

The Far Country

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-40

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by thanking Doug for filling in for me last Sunday while Naomi and I enjoyed a weekend away.

I also want to congratulate Doug! On the Sunday before the Monday Albertans headed to the polls for a referendum on separation, he managed to preach from the passage where Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” and *not* talk about Alberta politics!

Well done, Doug. And not just on avoiding Alberta politics. It was an excellent sermon (if you haven’t listened, I’ll remind you that text and audio of all sermons are available on our recently updated website).

As it happens, I chose the main passage I’ll be preaching on today—the last chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, the last chapter of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), the last chapter of “the Law” which is often distinguished from “the Prophets” and “the Writings” in the Hebrew Bible—on the Monday that Albertans headed to the polls.

The last chapter of the Torah ends with Moses standing on top of Mt. Nebo, looking out at a land that he will never enter (we’ll get to why later).

This image seemed to be a good metaphor for the “unfinished” and partial character of so much of our experience here on earth, whether we’re talking about politics or the church or our personal lives.

Promises go unfulfilled. Hopes go unrealized. Expectations are frustrated. Good intentions lead to outcomes we never expected or wanted. Hard work and virtue are not always rewarded. We never quite arrive at the destination we are seeking.

My sermon title today is “The Far Country.” Probably the most famous use of this term comes from Jesus’ story in Luke 15 of the lost son, who went off and squandered his inheritance in “the far country.”

It’s a term that represents being far from home, far from what we were created for, far from God.

But today I’m thinking of the term in a different way. The “far country” is our destination but it’s still a long way off. It’s something we long for, something we can see on the horizon, but it’s beyond our present experience.

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I’m going to return to this theme. But first, it’s perhaps worth sketching out at least the outlines of Moses’ story. This may be familiar to most of you, but a little review probably isn’t a bad idea.

The people of Israel went down to Egypt to escape a famine during the days when Joseph was second in command. There, they prospered and became a numerous people. They are enslaved by the Egyptians and subjected to harsh conditions. Still, they grew in number.

Pharaoh decides on a particularly brutal method of population control and power consolidation, ordering that all Hebrew baby boys be put to death at birth.

This is when a boy named Moses is born to Hebrew parents.

He is hidden in a basket, discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter, and grows up in the Egyptian royal household.

Fast forward to Moses in adulthood. One day he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, Moses strikes him down dead. Moses then flees Egypt, settles in Midian, marries Zipporah, and becomes a shepherd.

Moses spends forty years in Midian as a shepherd. In fact, Moses’ life can roughly be plotted out in three forty-year stretches.

Forty years in Egypt.

Forty years in Midian.
Forty years leading the people of Israel.

Anyway, one day God calls out to Moses in a burning bush and tells Moses he has been chosen to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery.

Moses initially balks at this, questioning his ability to do the job. *Send my brother*, he says. *He's better at public speaking*. But God wears Moses down, and he goes.

Then we have the famous showdown with Pharaoh. Moses insists that Pharaoh let the people go. Pharaoh resists. Back and forth we go. God sends a bunch of plagues culminating in the striking down of Egyptian firstborn sons.

Eventually, Moses leads Israel out of Egypt. God miraculously parts the Red Sea and they make their way out into the wilderness.

Here, Moses receives the covenant and commandments at Sinai, he intercedes for the people after they get tired of waiting for Moses at the top of the mountain and decide to fashion for themselves a golden calf to worship.

This will be a theme for the next forty years: Moses repeatedly mediates between God and a rebellious, idolatrous people.

Moses deals with complaints, rebellions, military threats, and the challenges of sustaining a people in the wilderness. The first generation is condemned to die there after refusing to enter Canaan.

And then we have Moses' failure at Meribah. When the people complain about having no water, Moses strikes the rock rather than following God's instruction to speak to it. Because of this, God tells Moses he will not lead Israel into the Promised Land.

Moses appoints Joshua to succeed him. He delivers his final speeches, rehearsing Israel's history, renewing the covenant, and urging the people to remain faithful to God even while knowing that they will not.

Those are the rough outlines of the story that culminates in Deuteronomy 34.

It is a story of God's miraculous deliverance, of human faithfulness, of human faithlessness, of sin and stupidity and trust and doubt, of the people turning their backs on God and then returning to God, and many other things besides.

And of course, we know that the story of Israel from this point onward will be the same mixed bag. Joshua will lead the people into the land, but a period of lawless chaos and violence will loom on the horizon, followed by a demand for kings like the other nations, a few good kings, a whole lot more terrible ones, a divided kingdom, conquest by a string of other empires, exile, return.

Israel's story tells the human story.

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At the risk of over-psychologizing Moses' experience, I can't help but wonder if standing on that mountaintop, pondering all that he had been through with the people, all that he had poured into leading them, he thought it was slightly unfair.

His disobedience seems a bit minor, after all. He struck a rock instead of speaking to it. He arguably committed a greater sin killing that slave-driver back in Egypt. Does the punishment fit the crime?

Moses did disobey a direct order from God in striking the rock instead of speaking to it. In striking it in anger instead of speaking to it as God commands, Moses seemed almost to be taking matters into his own hand instead of pointing to God and God's holiness.

Moses does seem to take an angry and confrontational approach to the people and this displeased God.

The story seems to be at its core a failure to trust, at least on some level. And to give proper glory to God.

But it still seems harsh, at least to us. Couldn't God have given Moses a second chance? We all have bad days, after all. Leadership is challenging at the best of times, and the people of Israel would not have been an easy to community to shepherd!

Not for the first time in Scripture, we don't get all the details we might prefer.

Anyway, there Moses stands, near the end of his life, some failures in the rearview mirror but also a lot of successes.

He has led the people of Israel through some of the defining moments of their story. He has witnessed the saving work of God. He has been faithful. He has been obedient. He has persevered in extraordinarily challenging circumstances.

And he will not see the fruit of his labours. There will be no victory march for Moses. He will die in the wilderness with the faithless generation that refused to enter Canaan.

All that he has given his life to will end, apparently unfinished. This is life, this side of eternity.

In this month's *Canadian Mennonite*, Troy Watson wrote an article called "Anabaptism vs. Artificial Discipleship."¹ It's a good article and worth reading.

But I paused at his opening few sentences:

One of the reasons I joined the Mennonite church in 1998 was its focus on peace and justice. Recently, I've found myself wondering if it's working. Is there more peace in our world? In our churches?

I read that question and wondered about the metric. Do we focus on peace and justice for the results? If the world and the church is becoming more peaceful, we're doing our job as Christians, if it's not, we're not?

Is it possible that we could be faithful and obedient in bearing witness to the kingdom of God and the world might not seem to obviously be getting any better?

I think we have to say, "yes." Is the world demonstrably more peaceful today than two thousand years ago when Jesus walked the earth? Maybe in some places. But certainly not in others.

And that's with two thousand years of the church's influence.

¹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/anabaptism-vs-artificial-discipleship/>

My assumption is that peace on earth and even peace in the church—or indeed any other good thing that Jesus came to proclaim and embody—will only ever be partial this side of eternity for the simple reason that people will not cease to be people.

Finite. Fallen. Fragile.

Unfinished.

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And, of course this truth extends into the deepest and most personal parts of our lives and experiences.

There will always be an unfinished character to our lives.

Our labours may sometimes seem to be in vain, in the church and in the world, in our lives.

We may pour our lives into this or that cause and see little progress.

We may do our best to love the people in our lives well, and not have this be reciprocated.

We may take meticulous care of our bodies and still get sick.

We may give our best years to building a business or a family and watch it fall apart or become less than we hoped it would be.

We may create things of beauty and goodness in the world that are never fully appreciated.

We may offer wisdom that goes unheeded, truth that is rejected, mercy that is spurned.

We may devote ourselves to the church and watch it struggle.

We may pray without ceasing and never get the answer we long for.

We may live lives of deep and committed faith and still have to walk through periods of suffering and confusion.

None of this means that we weren't doing the right things or that it wasn't worth the effort. It just means that we live in an unfinished world. A world where God's will is not yet done on earth as in heaven.

Sometimes, we will simply have to look out at a land we will never enter but trust that we have done our best to be faithful, that God is still good, and that there is a final chapter to the story in a world beyond that of our present experience.

In Hebrews 11, there is a long list of the heroes of faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Rahab, and many more. Moses is also in this list.

Of all these central figures in our story, the writer of Hebrews says this:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Heb. 11:13-16).

In this unfinished world, our task is not necessarily to be effective. It is to be faithful.

This is why I included a portion of today's gospel reading alongside the Deuteronomy reading today.

The religious leaders ask Jesus a question to test him. *Which commandment in the law is the greatest?*

He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

All the law and the prophets are fulfilled in love of God and neighbour.

All that Moses represents in the biblical story, all five books that end with him standing on Mt. Nebo looking out at the land he won't enter, all fulfilled in love of God and neighbour.

This is what Jesus says. This is the greatest commandment. This is a faithful response in a world where things are destined to remain unfinished.

Love.

If Jesus were to allow me to add my two cents, I might add the word “grace” because we will never be able to love well in this unfinished world without grace. Grace allows us to see our neighbours as they are, dearly loved precious image bearers and also sinners.

We can’t love sinners without grace. We will always be tempted to somehow resent or reduce them. Which Jesus never did.

Jesus was the master at loving unfinished human beings and an unfinished world as they were. We are to emulate him in this.

One final word. There is a sense in which Moses does see, finally, see the promised land.

In the New Testament, Moses appears alongside Elijah when Jesus is transfigured (Matthew 17:1–8). Moses, representing the law. Elijah representing the prophets.

And Jesus, representing the One they were both pointing to.

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,” a voice from the cloud rings out. “Listen to him” (Mat. 17:5).

So, let us do that. Let us listen to Jesus. Let us love God and love our neighbours in this unfinished world.

Let us be faithful, however distant the far country may look.

Amen.

