

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-9

Then 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 the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, 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 Zoar. 4 The Lord said to him, “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.” 5 Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. 6 He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. 7 Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. 8 The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

9 Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Bill and Ted were neighbors. Bill had a dog that loved to chase cats. Ted had a cat that hated dogs. Whenever Bill came to visit Ted, his dog would come along. The dog would chase the cat up a certain maple tree in Ted’s yard. This same scene would take place every time Bill came to visit Ted. After a couple of years Ted cut down the maple tree. A couple of days later Bill and his dog came to visit. Out around the house ran the cat with the dog right on his tail. Suddenly...about thirty feet in the air...the cat realized something different.

Ah...change! Sometimes it surprises us...takes us unexpectedly as it did for this poor cat. We don’t always welcome it...but change happens whether we like it or not. You find yourselves in a time of change. What was, is no longer the same...and what is to come is on the horizon...yet to be discovered.

Likewise, the Israelites in today’s scripture reading from Deuteronomy, find themselves on the cusp of something new. The journey that got them to this point was ridden with many twists and turns...many highs and lows. Finally, when they feel they have reached their goal...a moment meant to bring great joy...is interrupted with tragedy...the death of Moses. The Israelites find themselves in a new wilderness...a wilderness of grief...and a wilderness of questioning what now?

You also have lost two beloved leaders. I know for a fact...because I was blessed to have them in my youth group at Westminster...the gifts and leadership skills they shared through their ministry with you will be missed. The compassion and love with which they served you touched your lives...maybe more than you ever realized until now. You loved them...and now...perhaps unexpectedly for most of you...they have moved on to begin a new ministry with another congregation who will be blessed to have them...just as you were. That is the elephant in the room as I begin my ministry with you as your interim pastor.

People are interesting creatures. Even those of us who call ourselves Christians have expectations; and, when things seem to be good and moving in a direction that is satisfying and comfortable to us...we feel we have reached a sort of unchangeable nirvana. We may feel with certainty that we are moving on the path that God has set before us and therefore, since we are certain it’s God’s plan...the path will remain straight. That’s a nice place to be. It feels good.

God, however, has plans that evolve and involve more than our comfortable expectations. The plan that God had for his special people following Moses was being fulfilled as they reached

the entrance to the promised land. This place flowing with milk and honey was promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's descendants, but if we reexamine what God said when he made that promise to them, God never named any one particular person who would actually enter the promised land...not even Moses...the faithful leader of the Israelites through the wilderness experience.

The journey of faith and ministry we make with our pastors is often deeply meaningful and intimate. It is rich with hope for the future of good things yet to come. We believe God brings them into our lives; but what is difficult for us to accept many times is that...they may not always be with us. We may say and do all the right things...we may seem to be on the brink of great things...and yet, they leave us...not because they don't want to be with us anymore...but because they feel called to serve elsewhere.

God had his reasons for not allowing Moses to be the one to lead the Israelites into the promised land just as God has his reasons for change here at Hagerstown. In Moses' case it was because of a moment of disobedience on Moses' part. We don't always know the reasons for change...but we can be assured that God is in control.

So...as the story goes, Moses died in the plains of Moab at the ripe old age of 120 years...after seeing the promised land. The Israelites were heartbroken. After burying their beloved leader, they entered a time of mourning that went on for thirty days. The normal mourning period for a person in the Jewish culture was seven days. But for a person such as Moses who was a great and well-known person...the mourning period was longer.

It is uncertain what specific mourning practices were in place at the time Moses died, but Judaism includes elaborate practices of mourning the loss of a loved one. Jewish mourning periods have traditionally included the practice of rending or tearing one's clothes...weeping...and some may have even shaved their heads or put ashes or dust on their heads.

Mourning is, in the simplest sense, grief over someone's death. It is the process of grieving a loss...and in the more complex sense...grief occurs for any loss that we experience. You my brothers and sisters in Christ are in a time of mourning because of the loss of Tim, Audrey and Anita's presence and ministry among you. This is a time when grief is upon many of you. Grieving is a process...a journey that needs to be made before you can embark on a new journey. Going through the grieving process clears the path for a healthy new beginning.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a book title, "On Death and Dying". She did a study on the grieving process and identified six stages people use to cope with grief. She specifically addresses these stages as they are related to the death of a loved one. However, they are coping skills we use when we grieve any loss. The grieving stages Kubler-Ross identified are: shock, anger, bargaining, denial, depression and acceptance.

If we apply these stages to your loss of your pastors, they may look something like this: Shock – we can't believe they are gone...we didn't see this coming...how could this have happened; anger – angry with them for leaving you...the feeling of anger over something that may have happened to drive them away...anger with God, feeling it's God's fault that they are gone; bargaining – the desire to strike a deal with God to bring them back; denial – expecting to come this morning to find that this was all a bad dream...an unwillingness to let go and move on to something new; depression – feelings of deep sadness...lack of motivation or interest in getting involved; and acceptance -okay...this is happened...let's move on. Perhaps you can find yourself identifying with one of these stages now.

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Something important to remember when it comes to grieving is that while this may sound like it's a step 1, step two, step three and so on process...it is not. These stages Kubler-Ross identified are experienced randomly...revisiting those who are grieving at unexpected times. One may feel they he/she has arrived at acceptance...but finds him/her self suddenly in the throes of depression again when a meaningful church tradition planned and led by a previous pastor has been changed or lost. So, it is important to acknowledge what you are feeling...allow yourself to visit with it again...so that you can release it.

The grieving process should not be rushed through or overlooked. It is a journey that you will need to make with the support of one another. Accepting and appreciating that not everyone may be experiencing it as you are or at the pace you are. Encouraging one another along so that people don't get left behind or stuck in a space that is unhelpful to the rest of the body.

It works something like this: A silkworm was struggling out of the cocoon and an ignorant man saw it battling as if in pain, so he went and helped it to get free, but very soon after it fluttered and died. The other silkworms that struggled out without help suffered, but they came out into full life and beauty, with wings made strong for flight by their battle for fresh existence.

We need to allow ourselves to struggle through our grief so that we will emerge from our grief stronger and prepared for the new path God lays before us. God does have a plan for Hagerstown COB. God will provide another to shepherd you...just as God provided Joshua following Moses' death to lead the Israelites into the promised land. Having mourned their loss...they were **ready** to follow the one God provided to lead them.

The book of Deuteronomy does not end with the Israelites entering the promised land. As readers of this story we are left at a point between an ending and a beginning. Similarly, you are between the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. The Israelites journey was not complete...neither is yours. The Israelites had not arrived...they were poised for a departure...so are you.

Over the next few Sundays, we will be reflecting on worship and the role it has during our time of mourning. We will also explore the bond we have with each other and how that affects our ability to move ahead on our journey during this time of transition.

If you feel the need to talk with someone about your feelings of grief with the loss of Tim and Audrey, please let me know. I am ready to listen. I want to help you through your grief.

God is nowhere near finished with Hagerstown COB. Hold on to the promise that God is with you always...and cling to the hope that God is getting you ready, even now, for something new. Amen.