

## 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“The View from Mount Nebo”

29 October 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

**“I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may—light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful” (John Constable (1776 - 1837).**

+++++

I am going to explain our lesson so when we hear it we will have some context. Deuteronomy means a word of instruction, or “torah” and is the fifth scroll of the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy reinterprets Israel’s mission/vocation by paraphrasing Israel’s history to date. This text also underscores teachings such as: Moses speaking on God’s behalf, Moses’ legacy, how the assembled people of Israel functions—with stories about their wilderness adventures and the preparations to enter the land of promise.

Today’s reading is Deuteronomy’s concluding chapter of both the book and the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. Israel’s travelling is over; Israel looks forward to a new future as they enter the land of promised. Moses’ ministry has equipped them for a new life. In Deuteronomy 32:48-52, God tells Moses he will not enter the land of promise because Moses “broke faith” with Yahweh when the people demanded water and God provided (see Numbers 20:1-13).

From Mount Nebo God reveals to Moses the whole Land from the Sea of Galilee region (“Dan ... Manasseh”, vv. 1-2) in the north to the “Negeb” wilderness and in the south and from the “Western Sea” (i.e. Mediterranean) in the west to the Jordan in the east. “Judah” is in the center of the country. Moses, by now an old man, dies in “Moab,” and dies as he lived: “at the Lord’s command.” The writers of this story may have obscured Moses’ “burial place;” perhaps to avoid the Egyptian practice of worshipping the dead. The story of Moses laying hands on his successor occurs in Numbers. Thus, Moses passes on his leadership “spirit” to Joshua. The Lord evidently commissions Joshua and he receives his mentor’s authority—as Elisha did later from Elijah.

Hear our day’s lesson:

**34Then 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, 2all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. 4The 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.”**

**5Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.**

**6He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. 7Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. 8The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.**

**9Joshua 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. 10Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. 11He was unequalled for**

**all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, 12and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34: 1-12).**

Moses ends his ministry in the same place he began it—alone in the wilderness with God. As Moses tended his father-in-law Jethro's flock in Midian, Moses saw an inexplicable vision at Mount Horeb. A bush was on fire, yet was not consumed. Of course, you remember that Moses approached the burning bush and it was then that the voice of Yahweh called Moses. Yahweh revealed to Moses that he had seen the plight of God's chosen people—held captive as slaves in Egypt. God chose Moses to lead the people out of bondage, despite fleeing to Midian as a criminal refugee.

At the bush Yahweh terrified Moses with this call to service or ministry. Moses like most of us would have told God that Yahweh need to get someone else—anyone else—for such a huge responsibility. Yet, Yahweh assured Moses that God's presence would accompany Moses.

God has called us into the ministry and this is similar to how God called Moses. Every baptized person receives a call to ministry. All of us can engage in some form of ministry or another. This is why some churches distribute a "time and talent survey" in worship, often during this time every year.

Not every form of ministry is high-profile or celebrated well enough, but each form of ministry is vital to the work of Christ in our community. I noticed on the news some time ago an interesting situation that is like a parable about how important every function is in the church, although it is easy to overlook some functions. It seems that one afternoon two high schools were ready to play their 5A state play-off football game. The teams were ready and warmed up to play. The bands of both schools were there and a huge crowd of over 7,000 was ready for the kick-off. All of a sudden, it dawned on the coaches that someone was missing. The coaches from Carter High School had forgotten to secure referees. Lacking the six referees the game needed rescheduling. For the first time in a long time, people were mad at the referees, but this time not for anything they had done, but for something they had not done—show up.

The same thing can happen in a church. We often think that only a few selected tasks in the church are really important and the rest of the tasks are merely to give church-folk something to do. Nothing could be farther from the truth. A few years ago, we did a "time and talent survey" in one of my former churches. The congregation needed three people to be on the personnel committee (PPR) and 27 people to teach youth and children's Sunday School. This is a true story—I am not making this up! The irony was not lost on me that 27 signed up to be on the personnel committee and only three signed up to serve as Sunday School teachers.

*Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned: But I Have Several Excellent Excuses* is a title of one of Jim Moore's books—and excellent title indeed! Just think about a few biblical characters and imagine them proposes to God excuses like Moses did. Abraham was too old, while Joseph his brothers abused. Job went bankrupt, while Gideon was plainly afraid. Samson's excuse was that he was a womanizer, while the Samaritan Woman was divorced from multiple husbands. I could go on and on, but the idea should be clear. God calls us, we protest, and God continues to call and call and call. We can't hide from God.

Rather, we each have our own summons to ministry by God just as Moses did. What we see in Moses is someone who is reluctant to respond in the extreme. Moses even had a set of five excuses that he thought were rock solid.

I Am Not Qualified to Fulfill My Calling  
I Lack Knowledge to Fulfill My Calling  
I Do Not Believe I Can Fulfill My Calling  
This is Not My Calling  
I Do Not Want to Fulfill My Calling

Despite that fact that God calls unlikely people, and we as unlikely people and like Moses, can offer one excuse after another. Yet Yahweh/God still—even today—calls peculiar people to peculiar tasks at peculiar times—moments of opportunity which God never repeats. Each are unique! We might call these peculiarities of time and space—forks in the road, moments of decision. And if God really blesses us, then perhaps we, like Moses, can look at from our own Mount Neboes and see our lives and ministry opportunities to fulfill before we die.

**David Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado TX**