

Palisades Presbyterian Church
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 23, 2005

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

Hymns: All Creatures of Our God (455)
Spirit of the Living God (322)
Blessed Assurance (341),
Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow (591)
God, You Have Come to the Lakeshore (377)

Falling Upwards
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A friend of mine gave me this book, called *Mostly True: Collected Stories & Drawings*, by Brian Andreas. It is a collection of what the author calls “hand-stamped” stories and drawings. Some of them go like this:

We lay there and looked up at the night sky & she told me about stars called blue squares and red swirls & I told her I’d never heard of them. Of course not, she said, the really important stuff they never tell you. You have to imagine it on your own.

Or another ...

I never met the Devil (yet) but I imagine it’s a pretty scary experience, but then again I guess that’s the point.

And this little charmer about angels...

There are Angels everywhere you can imagine. I saw one hiding in the closet in our bedroom once & I invited her out but she said she was waiting for a friend. “Thank you just the same,” she said & next time I looked, she was gone.

On losing things,

The plumber was digging around in the pipes & he saw something shine in the muck & it turned out to be the soul of the last tenant. He gave it to me & I said I wonder how we can return it & he shrugged & said he found stuff like that all the time. You’d be amazed at what people lose, he said.

Or about remembering things lost,

I buried a nickel under the porch when I was 8, she said, but one day my grandma died & they sold the house & I never got to go back for it. A nickel used to mean something, I said. She nodded, it still does she said, and she started to cry.

Something about these little vignettes captures the thoughts behind what is on my mind this morning, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to take you there. It can be a tricky thing navigating some of my thinking! But we'll try.

Basically, it has to do with imagining and paying attention to the way our hearts lead us – in life and in the study of Scriptures.

It all started as I tried to put my arms around the account we read this morning that tells us Moses never got to the Promised Land. I'll tell you the truth, I never liked the report that he didn't make it there. Everyone got there except Moses. After all that work... It was embarrassing, demeaning, and not fair – at least at first blush.

After all, this was the prophet who took the people out of Egypt and through the desert, facing all sorts of challenges. Moses was a man who spoke "face to face" with God's presence and mediated for the Hebrews with God when they were being especially stiff-necked.

His relationship with God brought manna from the heavens and water from a rock. The rock, that was the problem. It was in striking that rock twice – not once, but twice – to make sure the water flowed that he committed a sin of unfaithfulness and demonstrated a lack of trust in God. The combination, according to the Scripture writers, was an unacceptable act that caused him to be disciplined and punished: forbidden from entering the Promised Land.

But "Hold on!" I think. This is the same Moses who had killed a man in anger in his youth, surely not the first time his anger had caused him trouble. Yet, God still called him.

God knew him – anger and all to be the one that would be important to the covenant struck long ago with Moses' forebears. So, couldn't God also understand a Moses who in his weariness, nervousness, exuberance – or even doubt goofed? Couldn't God look beyond his shortcomings and last mistake? Was all of Moses' work to be summed up in this one final assessment? Were God's expectations unfulfilled in Moses and could God actually have expectations that would be unfulfilled?

Imaginings...

Anyway, it still doesn't seem fair. Especially considering that if anyone should have been banned from the Promised Land – it should have been the Hebrews following their behavior in the desert! That's not the answer either, I guess.

The other part to all this has to do with Moses' death and his welcoming to the next place by God. How could this be a punishment?

Something is amiss here. There is something amiss and missing.

For me, this is where the part about listening to the Bible comes in. Reading it and letting it read us. Reading the verses over and again; reflecting upon them, letting them sit for a while and then returning to them; reading other writers' and commentators ideas; and listening some more for what stirs inside and around me. That's the process of imagining for me, of which imagination is only a small part. It's more than just imagination.

This process outlines some of how I prepare sermons or provocations. One of the commentaries that I read in all this is usually the Interpreter's Bible. You can find the dozen or so volumes on the shelf in my office, if you would like to take a look at them.

In the volume on Deuteronomy and this morning's "Death of Moses," one of the writers had this to say under the heading of **Accepted Disappointment**:

"From the human point of view, which loves happy endings, the story should have been rounded out with Moses leading his people over the Jordan. But there is really no reason to weep for him. Not many are given to live so full a life, and some of the most "finished" ones have been far briefer – Jesus' life for supreme example. Quality not quantity makes for perfection in living."

OK, but still...there's the veil of "too bad, Moses, too bad, tsk tsk." Really. At some point, Moses would die. When that happened, he like everyone else would leave behind certain things unfinished. It's part of being human. Something is always left "unfinished." Every life, when it comes to its transition – moves to the next and most welcoming of levels that reminds us we don't have to finish – period. We are done, our work completed, when our body and our spirit leave the forms as we know them...however that happens.

I am not sure why the writers of this section crafted what we have read -- in the way they have. Scholars have long believed that this section is an appendix to the preceding narrative, based on some of the priestly

versions and historical sources, perhaps expanded upon by Deuteronomic writer.

The priestly writers made up a school of redactors that edited or nuanced the text in light of the holiness codes, specifically taking on the pagans of their time and the issues of purification of oneself and one's soul according to those codes. That is to say that based upon the times in which this was written, the outcome is influenced by the surroundings and purposes of the redactors. "How much influenced?" is always the question, and it's not easy to get at that answer.

However, it is reasonable to expect that faithfulness was a key element of the teachings and codes of the time, and that no transgression against God – even from the prophets – would go without God's notice and some repercussion. These would be powerful teachings of the leaders of the Tribes and their efforts to form a nation.

Back to the text...

So, we've prayed, reflected, tried to understand, listened, checked the history and the times... what do we do next if it still doesn't quite make sense or seem right?

Turn it over! Yes, turn it over.

If you watch a child with something new (or some of us more inquisitive adults, which would include everyone here), one of the first things we do when we have something in our hands that puzzles us is usually to turn the object over and around and upside down to see if you can make sense of it, exploring its shape, touch, and feel. Along the way, we may not become certain of what we have, but some ideas – imaginings – do emerge. So, let's try that with the text: Just follow the Scripture and then imagine...

God says to Moses, perched high on the mountain,
"This is the land I will give to your descendants. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." So Moses the servant of God died there in the land of Moab according to the word of God."

Imagine for a minute that Moses actually got to the promised land ahead of everyone else. He didn't need to stop at Canaan. He took the express. In the process, he missed all that fighting and violence that was just over the mountains and the sunrise. It could just be that on that mountain outside of Canaan, Moses actually got to see the Promised Land – the real promised land and – finally – the Face of God. That's a punishment?!

Could it be Moses was actually rewarded by his death on that day, at that time, on that mountain?

Upside down? Maybe. Maybe...

But disappointments are not always what they seem to be. They are always temporal – passing, and segues to what comes next. Did Moses fall down as described in the Scriptures or was he actually falling upwards into the loving arms of God. Moses trusted God and never hid his enthusiasm for wanting to know all he could about God. “Show me your face!” Remember? He got door number one on that day on the mountain!

Moses was never given all the answers in his earthly form, no matter how chosen he was. Instead he was told to trust, to practice *hesed* – steadfast love – trust in God, do the legwork, leave the rest to God. And he was rewarded.

Part of me can't believe that Moses would have traded one extra second on this planet for anything, knowing that he was entering into what was next. And, yet, I know I'm wrong. Most of us, including me, are always a touch afraid of the unknown, however much we may trust. It's part of the human condition. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, which is another one of those gifts that makes me thankful for Jesus' humanity as well as his divinity.

By definition, being human is to be limited. No illusion or denial can change that. It is again, I think, why the Scriptures constantly turn us toward God AND one another, because the Body of which we are a part – requires all its parts.

However we may move toward the Spirit and nature of God, the journey accents our limitations as we come to know ourselves better and our gratitude for a loving God that embraces us anyway. We know its true in any number of ways. And it was true of Moses who later appears at the transfiguration of Jesus. He was in pretty good company, too, on a mountain once more having fallen up –

Remember Mark's version of this:

/9:2/ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, */3/* and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. */4/* And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

The prophet, the law, and the new way of Jesus – all together, telling us even this many years later that one of the most important things we can do is to listen and to watch. Listen for God in our lives and those we meet, watch for ways in which we can be loyal to our faith community and our outreach and welcoming to others.

Mark brings it all together in the Second Testament parallel version to this morning's reading: [In the version of the Bible used for this sermon, the red highlights are considered to be the actual words of Jesus]

One day an expert on Moses' laws came to test Jesus' orthodoxy by asking him this question: "Teacher, what does a man need to do to live forever in heaven?" Jesus replied, "What does Moses' law say about it?" "It says," he replied, "that you must love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you must love your neighbor just as much as you love yourself." "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you shall live!" The man wanted to justify (his lack of love for some kinds of people), so he asked, "Which neighbors?"

We know, here in this place, that it is "all neighbors" to which Jesus is referring. It is what the Palisades Presbyterian Church and others like it have made clear to everyone – we are all neighbors.

Our hesed toward each other, as we all struggle with our humanity, mortality, and other questions is the most important of answers. And, when we finally get to the point of giving up on figuring it all out, we know in some deep and abiding place that we must ultimately trust God – especially when we are unsure.

So, maybe, at those times when we feel as though we are somehow falling, maybe we just have things upside down. It could be that we are really rising to a new level, learning to soar.

A last vignette from the same book I began with goes like this:

They kept asking if the stories were true. We kept asking them if it mattered. We finally gave up. They were looking for a place to stand and we were looking for a place to fly.

You all have such beautiful wings!

Amen

Prayer of Forgiveness:

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes this about holiness:

Holiness in space, in nature, was known in other religions. New in the teaching of Judaism was that the idea of holiness was gradually shifted from space to time, from the realm of nature to the realm of history, from things to events. The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity. There were no naturally sacred plants or animals any more. To be sacred, a thing had to be consecrated by a conscious act of men and women. The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God.

In that holiness and persisting relation with God, we know that God has blessed and forgiven us. Let us know continue with the wonder and ease of the Sabbath in our worship and praise as we raise our voices in song.

Benediction:

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of God's hand.