

When We Don't Enter the Promised Land

It is reformation Sunday, so I can't think of a better time to talk about John Knox.

We don't know much about his early life... his father was a farmer in Scotland, his mother died when he was a little boy; we're not even sure about his birthday: it is sometime between 1505 and 1515. His father wanted more for him than farming, so he studied at the University of Saint Andrews, where he became a priest and a notary.

Sometime around then, he became persuaded of the rightness of the protestant reformation that was beginning to emerge in Scotland and since we're just covering highlights, I'll come straight to the point: He got caught up in the events that led to the murder of Cardinal David Beaton and when the French Queen Regent of Scotland brought in her friends to help, he was taken prisoner by the French.

He spent two years in galley enslavement, rowing in the depths of a boat.

After he was released, he was exiled to England.

In England, he was charged to the parish of Berwick-upon-Tweed, where he ministered until Mary Tudor became queen of England. Once more he was exiled, this time to Geneva, where he encountered John Calvin, from whom he learned the principles of reformed theology.

He returned to Scotland.

He was exiled back to Geneva.

He returned to Scotland. (You should see a trend emerging here.) On his last return to Scotland, he was delayed a bit because he couldn't get a visa to pass through England. He'd written a troublesome pamphlet entitled, "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women," and Queen Elizabeth I was not amused by it.

He served his last call at St. Giles' in Edinburgh, and he died one day after preaching the induction of his successor to that pulpit. At the time of his death, the throne of Scotland was still occupied by a woman with whom he vehemently disagreed.

The future of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland was by no means yet clear.

It really could *not* be said that his life's work had been achieved.

There is no monument to him other than a stone in the pavement behind the church where it notes that he lies buried somewhere in that parking lot. Incidentally, it was a great honor to be buried in the church yard.

John Knox was a man who knew what it is to be disappointed. He was a man who knew what it is to struggle toward an end and yet *not* to see it achieved.

I love the sense of satisfaction that comes from a work completed.

Perhaps you do too, there is something deeply gratifying in finishing meaningful work.

The bigger the task, the more lofty the goal, the more fulfilling it is to knock it off the list.

So, I find there are few verses of scripture as poignant as those when Moses is carried by God up to Mount Nebo and shown the Promised Land, because he will not be permitted to enter it.

God was clear early on that Moses would not be allowed into the promised land – there are numerous occasions when the reason is given. Frankly, the reason ultimately is a moving target. There is something unfair about it – almost unkind even – so much so that the late Patrick Miller equates the denial of Moses’s desire to go into the promised land to the disappointment that permeates the book of Job. Miller writes, “Whether or not Moses is viewed as a tragic figure, certainly the tradition seems to see in his death the unfulfillment of the highest order, in that a life is cut short of the goal toward which it has always been directed. Such failure is often what seems to make death a tragic part of human existence.”¹

There is something deeply sad about the story of Moses!

He didn’t want the job in the first place. God coerced him at the burning bush way back in Exodus. God made him lead God’s frequently fickle people. You may recall the moment we read recently where God utterly despaired of the Israelites. In an almost comical interlude, God refers to them as Moses’s people, to which Moses rather tartly reminds God that they are, in fact, *God’s* people.

It was Moses who listened to the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness: First that they would starve, then that they would die of thirst, then that they didn’t have meat, then that their diet was too bland. *Moses* is the one who offers sympathy. *God* ultimately tells Moses that if they don’t shut up, God is going to send so much meat that the Israelites are going to have quail coming out their noses. That’s a direct quote.

Despite their closeness, when Moses begs to be allowed to go into the land, God nonetheless says *no*.

Things will go a different way. Moses will not enter the Promised Land.

It seems resoundingly unfair. It seems resoundingly disappointing.

I suspect it is not too much of an overreach to say that the story of Moses has something to say to everyone who ever experienced *disappointment*.

¹ Miller, Patrick. Deuteronomy, in *Interpretation*. (JKP: Louisville, 1990) p243

If you have ever worked arduously and long toward an outcome that you will not see realized, this story is for you.

It seems almost cruel sometimes to call attention to the fact that we will all face disappointment in our lives. *Happy Commitment Season!*

But the truth doesn't change based upon our ability to stomach it, and things *don't* always work out the way we want them to.

Sometimes we work diligently and hard, and still, despite our best efforts, things don't work out.

I don't mean the disappointment of a relief pitcher that can't close the game, or a Scharbomb or Bohm Run that failed to materialize.

No, *real* disappointment tends to run much, much deeper.

I don't have to list off things like divorce, downsizing, death, and disease for you immediately to recall the deeper disappointments of which I'm speaking.

I almost feel bad for bringing it up, except it is fairly well a universal part of life that we all face disappointments.

We don't enter the Promised Land.

I imagine the Promised Land might look a little different for each of us – we are, after all, individuals with varying hopes and dreams. What might seem like a silly disappointment to me could seem monumental to you. Or what seems insignificant to you might be insurmountable to another. What *peeves* you may *pain* me.

We are endlessly complex creatures, and yet the common experience of living this life is that into each of our lives, a little rain will fall.

Or a lot.

Or a devastating flood.

Interestingly, the author of Deuteronomy never tells us how Moses felt about the Promised Land. God takes Moses up to Mount Nebo and shows him that the promise will be fulfilled, and then Moses dies.

It's really not the most hopeful passage of scripture; I could almost feel bad about preaching on it on an autumnal Sunday when there is so much to be excited about in our common life.

Almost.

But there is this twist that turns this story around. No, Moses will not go to the Promised land, but God *does* carry Moses to the top of the mountain to see the land.

It's not that God didn't care what Moses felt, but rather that God's course of action will be different. Within the relationship between God and Moses, there is a deep and abiding *care* implied on the part of God. Moses is not just a tool that God decided to use, but rather a mortal with whom God enjoyed a loving and personal relationship. When Moses comes to the end, God does not step back and just let Moses go, but rather carries him to the top of the Mountain and shows him the Promised Land.

That puts a little different spin on this story.

It is to the point of a platitude to say that being God's people does not mean that we don't encounter any unpleasantness. We all know that. If we didn't know that, then every minor head cold would be a constant threat to faith; a hangnail would upend our spiritual lives. It's no secret that Christian faith guarantees us virtually nothing when it comes to living this life.

No, God guarantees us *almost* nothing, almost nothing.

God guarantees us *nothing but God*.

That is the promise of baptism. We have been blessed to celebrate a lot of baptisms this fall, and I love it, but it is a promise to rely on even in the moments when I'm not taking the victory lap down the aisle with the newest baptized member of this congregation, the promise that God is *always* in this thing with us.

And God gave us each other to live that promise out.

Mostly, we baptize infants and adults here, but every once in a while, we get to baptize a child who is old enough to know what is going on.

Have you ever tried to explain baptism to a four-year-old?

We know, theologically, what it means. Baptism is a visible sign of God's invisible grace. We know that it is the sacrament of inclusion, that in baptism, God grafts us onto the body of Christ. Being grafted onto the body of Christ is really rather esoteric for children to understand.

So, instead, I just tell them that it means that God, and we, have promised always to be there for them.

That is one of the central promises that make up Christian faith: That whatever the challenges, whatever mess we find ourselves in – and we do find ourselves in messes from time to time – that we are all in this mess together, and that God is in this mess with us.

God is always with us. Sometimes in the Promised Land, and sometimes on the mountaintop looking off into an uncertain future. *God is always with us*.

It is Reformation Sunday, and I can't think of a better time to talk about Martin Luther.

It really was a terrifying thing to be a reformer of the church, to take on all of the authority of the church and to say, "No, I just don't really think so."

It takes a special kind of conviction to be excommunicated.

It takes a special kind of commitment to row in the galley of a ship for two years like Knox.

It takes a special kind of conviction to nail ninety-five complaints to a door and go into hiding like Martin Luther.

And it is hard to wander through the wilderness and not know whether you will ever reach the Promised Land.

No wonder Luther suffered terribly throughout his life from melancholy.

There is a story told that once, when Luther's friends saw him in a period of terrible despondency, they noticed he was writing something, over and over again. When he got up and walked away, they went and looked at what he had written.

Over and over, he had written one word: *Baptismo*.

Time and again, Luther comforted himself with the assurance, "You are baptized."

That was his comfort. That was his assurance: That he rested always, as you do, and as I do, in God's care.

When the pope's emissary threatened him with excommunication, he challenged Luther, "And when you have been abandoned by the princes, and when you have been deserted by the people, where, Brother Martin, where will you be then?"

"Then as now," answered Luther, "in the hands of Almighty God."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.