

Transfiguration Sunday C Deuteronomy 34:1-12 “When God Closes a Door, He Opens Up Heaven”

“When God closes a door, He opens a window.” This proverb is so familiar, we may think that it is in the Bible, but it is not. It does describe the times in our Christian lives when one opportunity does not materialize, but very soon another equally good or even better situation presents itself to us. Moses has waited 40 years to enter the land of Canaan, the place God had promised to his people’s ancestors hundreds of years earlier. But this opportunity will not happen. The Israelites will enter Canaan, but without Moses. God has a better place for him to enter, the promised land of eternal life where all God’s people see their Lord face to face. For Moses God is closing the door to this life, but He is opening up eternal life for him. God is also opening up heaven for us by sending to us the prophet greater than Moses, God’s own Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ.

We first must go back in time from the time of our text. The Israelites are grumbling again. “Moses, you brought us out into the desert to die, there is no water here.” Moses takes their complaint to God. By His command Moses will provide the people with water to drink. God said, “Moses, speak to the rock and water will pour out of it.” Instead, Moses decides to add his own dramatic flair to God’s miraculous act. He tells the people, “Must Aaron and I bring water out of this rock.” Then Moses strikes the rock with his staff, but nothing happens. Then he strikes it again and water comes out. God blessed His people with what they needed even though Moses did not follow God’s instruction. Such insubordination on the part of His called servant would not be overlooked or excused by a holy God who demands perfect obedience from His people. Because Moses took this matter into his own hands and tried to push God out of the picture, God’s verdict is that Moses would not lead the people into the land God was giving them.

Was Moses disappointed that this opportunity was closed to him, only to see the land but not enter it? Every so often throughout Deuteronomy Moses mentions that it was because of the people that he would not enter the land. It was hard for him to let that go. But by this time Moses has humbly accepted God’s will that he would not lead the

people into Canaan. How well do we accept God's will and how patient are we with God's ways when it comes to the opportunities in our lives? The one we thought was Mr. or Mrs. Right didn't work out. The job we dreamed of having we did not get. Can we look back and see that that person would have been wrong for our living of the Christian faith or that job would have taken us away from our family or caused us to compromise our faith.

When presented with a life decision we sin by not considering what God would have us do, but instead attempt to override God's will with our own desires, acting as though we are in charge, and that God should take orders from us. We also sin if we make a decision based on God's will and resent God for it, thinking later, "if only I had married that person or taken that job, my life would be better, what does God know anyway?" But we do not know what is best for our lives or what will happen in our future. When we try to go it on our own, apart from the will of God, we will suffer the consequences of our selfish actions. Instead, like the country song says, we should "thank God for unanswered prayers."

It is often said that growing old is not fun, but that it sure beats the alternative. We may understand that statement but, as Christians, we don't necessarily agree with it. For God's chosen people the alternative to growing old is not simply physical death, it is eternal life. Moses has grown quite old, 120 years to be exact, but he has done so gracefully. In the iconic movie, "The Ten Commandments," Charlton Heston made the 120-year-old Moses look pretty dashing. While not having movie star good looks, the Bible does say that Moses' eyesight is still good and his body still strong. Yet his service to God is now complete. His leadership of God's people is now finished. After seeing the land to which he has led the Israelites, Moses will depart from this earth, but do so in a unique way.

God Himself buries Moses, so no one knows exactly where that grave is. No enemies can deface it. No followers can worship at it. But on this Transfiguration Day we know that this was not the last appearance of Moses in the Bible. Nor is it his last act of service to God. In the Gospel reading today Moses, along with Elijah, appears with Jesus before

three of His disciples on the mountain where Jesus is revealed in all of His divine glory. They speak of Jesus' own "exodus," His departure of suffering, death, resurrection and ascension that soon will take place in Jerusalem.

Up until this time of transfiguration Jesus has not said much about what would happen to Him once they get to Jerusalem for the Passover. His followers were not prepared to understand it until they had seen His glory. Likewise, as we face our own personal exodus, our departure from this life, we are not comfortable talking about death, neither we nor those around us fully understand it. But as the people of God in Jesus Christ we do know that beyond death is eternal life in God's personal presence. This too is largely the realm of the unknown. But we get a few glimpses of it in the Bible, such as our gospel reading today. Just imagine being part of that conversation, listening in to Jesus, Moses and Elijah!

While we may not know enough about eternal life to speak of it in detail with others, all we need to know is that it is God's promise to us. In our text the Israelites have travelled many miles over four decades to a land they had never seen, but they know that God had promised it to them through their ancestors. Part of God's promise is that this is a good land, flowing with milk and honey. Likewise, we travel miles and years of this earthly life looking ahead to eternal life, not knowing what it is like but having God's promise of it to us in our holy baptism, and having a glimpse of its goodness in God's forgiveness of our sins that we receive here in this Lord's Supper.

The Israelites will enter God's promised land missing the only human leader they had known. Moses was the one who had come to them in Egypt, in midst of their slavery, and spoken promises of freedom from the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses backed up these words with miracles from this God, ten plagues upon their Egyptian oppressors until their leader Pharaoh let those Israelite slaves go free. Moses then led these newly freed people through parted sea waters, to God's presence at Mt. Sinai and through the wilderness to the Jordan River.

But as important as Moses was to God's people Israel, as vital as his leadership was for their freedom, and as close as Moses' relationship to God had been, speaking with Him face to face, God has a greater act of salvation yet to come, and a prophet greater than Moses to bring this freedom to His people. In Deuteronomy 18 we learn of God's promise that one from among their own people would come to speak God's word to them.

God's own Son from eternity, Jesus Christ, was born of Mary as a true man, born into this Israelite race. He came to speak and to be God's Word in human flesh, not only for the children of Israel, but for all the world. Even more than Moses did, Jesus performed signs and wonders, miracles over sin by His own divine power, His healing of diseases, His control over nature, and His driving out of evil spirits. More importantly for us, Jesus came to bring us freedom and to lead us out of our own slavery, one not to human masters but to our own sinful nature.

Jesus spares us the punishment of our rebellion against God by suffering the punishment of our sins on the cross. Jesus destroys the power of our death by dying that eternal death in our place. Jesus opens up for us the promised land of heaven by rising from the grave in victory over death. In Jesus' Word and Sacraments we now, like Moses did then, see the face of God. God speaks to us in His words of the Holy Bible. He invites us to speak back to Him in prayer.

Unless Jesus returns within the next few decades to bring this world to its end, all of us can expect to experience what happened to Moses in this passage and what has happened to all our ancestors before us, that is, physical death. The time is coming when God will close for us the door to this earthly life, but then, because of Jesus Christ and the freedom and forgiveness we have through Him, God will open up for us the window that is eternal life in His personal presence. In Jesus' Name. Amen.