

A VIEW OF WHAT LIES AHEAD

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Deuteronomy 30:15-20a, 34:1-4
Philippians 3:10-14

July 26, 2026

In our Old Testament reading today we find an elderly Moses at the cusp of the Promised Land with the wilderness weary Israelites. For forty years, ever since their dramatic departure from Egypt, they had been a nomadic people, roaming through an inhospitable wilderness. It was a place they yearned to leave and yet a place where God had always provided for their needs. For all those years, they lived an unsettled, far from ideal life as they were unable to claim God's promises. Such a life was not what God had intended at the beginning of their journey, but unfortunately, when sin comes into play, plans can change and blessings can be delayed. But God is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness and even if delayed, promises WILL be fulfilled. So, after forty years of a roaming, unsettled life, the people of Israel have arrived at Mt. Nebo and the Promise Land, the land of Canaan, lies ahead – to the west.

As the people of Israel anxiously stood at the boundary of this new beginning, God's great leader and prophet, Moses, stood before them for one last sermon. As he looked at all the people, apparently, flashes of memories from the past forty years started going through his mind. It had not been an easy time; Moses had endured unrelenting whining and complaining at times, as well as an outright lack of faithfulness from the too often argumentative, bad-tempered, and difficult to deal with Israelites during those desert years. Over those forty years, there had been times of great frustration and anxiety – times of fear, anger and disagreement. But Moses described the experience as a mixture of both "*blessings*" and "*curses*" (Deuteronomy 30:1).

For it was also true that there had been good times – there had been births and weddings and other celebrations during their years in the wilderness. Moses recalled meaningful Sabbath celebrations and heartfelt expressions of faith. He recalled God's faithfulness and the many provisions God had provided on their transforming journey from slavery to freedom. As their leader and I would also say their pastor for those many years, Moses had shared God's commandments and covenant promises with the people as he called them to live with faith. Even when the people looked back, longing for their homes in Egypt, and concluded that things were better for them back there, Moses stood firm as he offered God's future, and as he directed their attention to God's glorious promises that lay ahead for them.

As Moses and the people of Israel now stood at the "gateway" of the Promised Land, Moses makes it clear in his sermon that they have a choice to make. Their one option is to continue looking back, yearning for the way life used to be, complaining about their current life, and so miss out on God's future blessing. Their second option is to step ahead with faith and to live into God's promised blessings of life and prosperity. As the people consider these options, Moses says, "*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him...*" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20a).

The choice seems obvious as we remember the Israelites and as we also consider ourselves, and yet, people of faith are all too often found looking back, yearning for the past, and unable to move forward with faithful conviction. When our memories of the past are more exciting than our vision for the future than we are bound to fail at claiming God's promises. None of us can claim God's promises for the future when we are constantly looking behind us. We cannot make progress towards God's future blessing, if we are yearning only to recall and recreate past experiences of God's blessing. From biblical days to today, people of faith have often been comfortable dwelling on the past than facing a new reality of God's blessing for today and into the future. There is within us human beings a tendency to categorize the known past as good and the unknown future which will certainly be different, as bad or at least unwelcome because it's unfamiliar.

How do we move beyond the blessing of our past when what we really want to do is hold onto it, and treasure it as a precious and irreplaceable heirloom? How do we move into the future when what we really want to do is figure out how we can recreate those meaningful past moments and hold onto the comfortable present reality? It's not easy to move into an unknown future, it has never been easy. And yet, throughout the Bible, from Abraham to Moses, from David to the prophet Isaiah, from God's personal revelation in Jesus to the Apostle Paul, God is continually directing people of faith to a hope-filled future that is different than what we have known. But of course, getting to that future always involves change and challenge. As people of faith, we remember with gratitude our past revelations of God, but we must always be looking ahead so that we can embrace and live into God's future revelations.

So as Moses stood at Mount Nebo looking at the hopeful future that God was providing for his people, he knew there were those who would have a hard time moving ahead and claiming God's promises for the future. Even though most of the people who kept looking back to Egypt had died on the way, there were many others who had been born along the way and who only knew the blessing of God's provided manna, quails and fresh water in the wilderness. A nomadic life was the only one they had ever known, and they had gotten used to it and God's provisions along the way. But even though it seems to be human nature to hold onto God's past blessings and today's familiarity, God continues to direct people of faith to move forward into that which is unknown and unfamiliar. The reason God does this is so that we and others may experience God's intended blessing of new life.

So, what Moses did was stand before the people and lay out an exciting vision for the future. He preached words of hope-filled encouragement, and he challenged them to "choose life" by choosing God's future. Following his inspirational message, Moses was then invited by the Lord to ascend Mount Nebo which is the highest point of the mountain range known as Pisgah. From that high place, the Lord gave Moses a good view of the Promised Land, and then the Lord said, *"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 own eyes, but you shall not cross over there"* (Deuteronomy 34:4).

I wonder what went through the mind of Moses' at that moment when he learned that after 40 years of desert roaming that he would not be entering the Promised Land. Throughout all those years, he had been the people's biggest cheerleader when they lost faith, as well as the enforcer of discipline when they

stepped out of line. He had been fully committed to the mission, and he had faithfully fulfilled that mission. And yet, Moses' journey was to stop short of entering the Promised Land. As he gazed upon the land flowing with milk and honey and as he imagined the future for God's people in that land, I can't help but wonder if he might have thought, "I wish I could go with them." I wonder if Moses thought, "If only I could have a little more time; just another year, a few months, or simply a few hours to set my feet upon Promised Land ground, then I would experience a greater sense of the mission's completion.

But despite his many years of faithfulness, God's word to Moses was, "No." Moses had done what God had wanted him to do, and Joshua would now be the one to continue the mission. Of course, I don't exactly know what Moses was thinking and feeling in those moments, but I find myself interpreting those moments with the lenses of my own personal thoughts and feelings. Moses had experienced many trials and challenges, but he had grown very close to the people over the years. He cared for them deeply, and the thought of being separated from them must have weighed on his heart. They had shared many everyday as well as sacred moments out in the desert, and those experiences and relationships had shaped Moses as a person. There were times Moses bore the burdens of God's people, but there were also times when they helped him bear his burdens. Relationships are like that. When you share life's struggles as well as celebrations with others day after day for many years, a bond is established that makes separation difficult.

And yet, even as Moses stood there on the mountain, wishing he could enter the Promised Land, he knew that the right thing was for him not to go. Moses, after all, was 120 years old according to the Bible, and while we are told he was remarkably preserved for a man of that age, I'm certain his body was not actually up to what was ahead. There were going to be a lot of battles, so what was needed was a warrior who could lead them in that way. That person was Joshua, not Moses. God had given Moses the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt and across the desert to the cusp of the promised land because he was the right person with the right gifts and temperament to accomplish that task. But Joshua was now tasked with leading the Israelites into the Promised Land because not only was he younger and more energetic, he had the gifts and temperament to accomplish that task.

As you might imagine, I feel a kinship with Moses today, as I stand here peering into the future of the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls, knowing that I will not be part of what lies ahead for this church. There are many thoughts going through my mind. Together, we have weathered a lot of storms like new technology, the introduction of contemporary music in worship, the coming and going of different staff members, the impact of a worldwide pandemic, the loss of longtime church friends through death, relocation and some who just left with us wondering why, and of course, the division and disaffiliating of fellow United Methodist congregations these past couple of years... Clearly, there have been difficult, painful times, and yet weathering them together drew us closer to one another. This congregation is less divided and much more of a caring church family than you were twelve years ago. We are clearly smaller, and yet new ministries are blessing people both inside and outside this congregation. And because of an increased spirit of generosity, the church's financial stability as well as our commitment to helping others has increased.

Of course, I wonder about the future, what it might look like and the blessings that might yet be experienced if I was still a part of this congregation's future. I think I speak for all pastors who stand in the pulpit towards the end of a long ministry and who still feel there is unfinished business to be accomplished. It's not at all unusual for us pastor-types to think that if we only had a little more time we could accomplish more and so experience more of God's blessings together. Yet, I think no matter when a pastor leaves a church, whether it be after 4, 8, 12 or more years, that a sense of unfinished business and wondering about what might be accomplished with just a little more time together are typical thoughts that cross the hearts and minds of both pastor and congregation.

For me, it's sad to leave those with whom I have shared so many life experiences - experiences that brought us closer and bound us together in our love for God and our love for one another. And yet there comes that time when someone else who is younger, who has different gifts, talents and ideas is best suited to carry on. I have fulfilled the role to which I was called and appointed, and now it's time for someone else to fulfill his call and appointment. I do not doubt that God will provide for you and that God intends a future of blessing for this church family.

Moses received and accepted God's will for him, and I'm convinced that what helped him do that was his remembrances of God provisions both for himself and the people throughout the many challenges they had faced. After all, it was not actually Moses, but God who had liberated the Israelites from the Egyptians. It was God who led them through the desert and who fed and protected them. It was God who faithfully watched over the people while Moses was with them, and it was God who would continue to watch over them through the help of a new leader after Moses' departure.

I am convinced that the same God who sustained and blessed past generations of UMC of CF members, will sustain and bless you, the current generation, as well as future generations. From this vantage point the future may seem a bit hazy and uncertain, but one thing is for certain, God is about to do a new thing with the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls! This new and unknown future can feel uncomfortable, but we believe in a God of resurrection life - a God whose plans even when unfamiliar and difficult lead to new and abundant life. So even though I am clearly not Moses, I offer to you this day the same challenge that Moses offered to the people of Israel. It's the same challenge that Jesus extended to his disciples as he invited them to follow him into a new and unknown future. Yes, the future may appear foreign but claim the blessing of God's plans for your future by choosing to move forward with faith and hope.

Today, I believe God has given us a view of what lies ahead. That view will have its challenges, but it will also have its blessings. That view becomes reality only as you and I move into with a commitment to claim God's promises by following Jesus' example, by loving and serving others, and by working towards the transformation of the world. A choice is placed before me and you as the Body of Christ known as the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls. We are invited to choose life and hope, and so with that in mind, I invite you to join me in saying Paul's words from the third chapter of Philippians: ***"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"*** (Philippians 3:13b-14). Amen and Amen.