

A Communion Sermon for Covenant

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Covenant Baptist Church, San Antonio

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When we were kids, we liked to tell the riddle, “What is black, and white, and red all over?” Depending on who was telling it, the answer was either a newspaper or an embarrassed zebra. I have a riddle this morning, though it’s not nearly as clever: What is stressful, and fun, and painful all over? There’s more than one answer to that one too, you may be thinking. Life, in general, for one. I’m thinking more specifically of transitions. Maybe I’m extra aware of the bundle of emotions associated with transition because Nate and I are in the thick of it. Nearly everything has changed for us—I have a new job, we have a new city, new church, new house, new friends. Almost nothing has stayed the same, and as we all know from experience, nearly all transitions include some stress . . . some excitement . . . some pain. For example, you remember the transition into college—you celebrate with excitement newfound freedom, you grieve losing the worry-free carelessness of childhood, you stress over exams. Or transitioning into parenthood—you celebrate new life, you grieve the loss of uninterrupted sleep, you stress over the responsibility of raising a child. Junior High—you stress big time about fitting in at school, you grieve the loss of life before braces. And you celebrate. I don’t remember what you celebrate in junior high, but I’m sure there was something.

It goes without saying, some transitions are more fun than others; some are more gut-wrenching or devastating. But transitions are a part of life—the closing of one season, the opening of something new. Today’s text is about a major transition in the life of Israel.

We began our journey with Moses on the mountain before the burning bush. You remember, it was my first Sunday here, and Moses was first hearing his call, deciding to step out into a new adventure with God. Today Moses is up on a mountain *again* to *conclude* his call, to bid farewell to the journey, to say goodbye to life. The two mountains are towering bookends on either end of the wilderness sojourn, framing Moses’ faithful service from start to finish. And for the Israelites as a people, today marks the conclusion of one particularly lengthy and significant and vibrant chapter of their story as a people.

For us, as readers peering in, it might seem natural that Moses would die here, at the conclusion of the wilderness journey. He’s played his part; he’s led them right up to the Promised Land; his job his complete. In terms of a story, things are fitting together nice and neat. But in terms of real life, Moses’ death is a tragedy. He’s worked this hard to get the people this far, and now God calls him home right before he takes that step into the Land he has been headed towards for a very long time.

The people grieve the loss of Moses for *thirty* days. Which makes me wonder if *our* funerals are way too short.

It takes time to grieve properly, to grieve well. Our society likes to distance itself from grief; often we try to move on and move away as fast as possible. These days we let someone else

build the coffin, someone else dig the grave—some detached, unknown person we can hire so that our hands don't have to touch the things that represent the finality of life. We don't have to feel the rough wood of the coffin on our fingertips, we don't have to hammer any nails, we don't have to lower any bodies, we don't have to drive a shovel into dirt. We buy a box premade. When we arrive at the graveside, even the mound of dirt has been covered with a nice tarp so that we don't have to *look* at the dust from which we were created and to which we shall return.

But that's not how they used to do it. You used to have to see and feel and smell the reality of death when a loved passed on—and that wasn't such a bad thing. It helped you grieve, it helped you process, it helped you think and soak in and *say goodbye*. Like when Harry Potter insists on burying Dobby without magic—Harry knew that he needed to connect himself to his grief in a tangible, physical way. (That's the second time I've made a Harry Potter reference in a sermon!) The Israelites didn't get to bury Moses because it was a mystery as to where he died, *but* they did stop for *thirty* whole days to grieve him proper, and I think their extended pause has something to teach us.

I'd like to point out that there are some losses we forget to grieve at all. We at least hold funerals for those deceased, even if the ceremony is truncated. But we don't always stop to properly grieve other losses—the loss of a dream, the loss of our childhood, the loss of a friendship, the loss of a skill that once was ours, the loss of health, the loss of healthy parents—still alive, but just not the same, the loss of a vocation, the loss of an ideology. We think we should just be able to move right along. It doesn't make sense to stop with the Promise of Better Things just ahead, we tell ourselves. But the Israelites stopped for thirty days just steps away from the Promised Land. They realized there was something worth stopping for, even when they were on the cusp of something great. Which says to me that even when you're about to enter something as dazzling as the Promised Land, it's still okay to pause and grieve what you've had to leave behind. That's the nature of transition—we mourn for the past as we revive hope for the future. No matter how exciting the future may seem, the future will fall flat if we do not carry with us remembrances and memorials of the past.

And the Israelites are certain to memorialize Moses. They commemorate him as a prophet like none other, the one who knew the Lord face to face. *We know* from reading the whole story that the whole “face-to-face” thing was more complicated than it sounds here, but knowing the complexity of it only highlights Moses' tenacity and bravery. The text also remembers Moses' deeds, the way he served as a conduit for God's miracles and God's deliverance. The people need to remember who Moses was, to honor him and to continue to tell the stories about him because memories pave the way into the future. The future will not look the same as the past, but the future will be informed by the past, if it is to be any kind of future worth living. Joshua is their new leader, but he's the leader *because Moses* laid his hands on him. Thus the future carries the imprint of the past, and that's a good thing. Not because Moses was perfect or particularly exceptional, and certainly not because the past was faultless and wonderful, but because we cannot live isolated from the stories that have shaped us and created us and brought us this far.

And did you know that our weekly worship is supposed to remind us of this truth? As a church, when we worship, we're trying to bridge the gap between the Christian past and the Christian future. Christian worship is about reenacting the stories of God's people, the Biblical stories of

Exodus and Exile and Easter, and in so doing, we make the stories our own, and when we embrace the stories, we shape how we will live in the future.

In particular, that's what Communion is; a particular piece of our worship that serves as a bridge, a link, from past to future. We grieve that our Christ had to die, that our sins brought him there, that the world is so torn as to need drastic measures such as this, our King on a cross. We remember the nails, the crown of thorns, the bloodied Savior. But we also celebrate with renewed hope, every time we eat the bread and drink the cup, that Christ both died *and* is risen. That our futures are alive with possibility and potential because of him who lives, him who conquered death. He is our story, our past, but He is also our hope and our future. So we retell it over and over again, reenacting it repetitively, pausing on the cusp of the Promised Land to remember death so that resurrection might be ours as well.

May we not live such hurried lives that we rush forward to grasp the Promises without pausing to let go of what we must surrender. May we embrace life in its fullness—the joy and the grief. May we grieve well, celebrate vibrantly, worship fully. May we learn how to tell our stories, how to help each other bolster the longevity of our memories. May we resurrect old stories that renew our hope and make new life possible. May we remember Christ who died, Christ who was buried, Christ who rose again—losing our fear of death and enhancing our love for life. Amen.