

### ***The End of the Law***

In the name of the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, dear friends in Christ: I can't read this morning's Old Testament lesson without feeling sorry for Moses. As we heard, the Lord directs him to climb to the top of Mount Nebo where, from its commanding height, he can see the entire Promised Land spreading out before him. Mind you, he's not *in* the Promised Land – that fertile and well-watered country flowing with milk and honey; no, he's still in the wasteland east of there, standing on the naked stone, peak of Pisgah, blasted smooth by hot sand blowing up from desert floor below. And so his predicament is like that of a penniless street urchin with his face pressed against the glass of a dazzling window display of a candy or toy store all decked out for Christmas. From where he is all can do is stare with hopeless longing at the wonders he's allowed to see with his eyes but never to taste or to touch.

And what surely makes it worse for Moses is that getting into the land he's now overlooking has been the single goal of his life for the past forty years. For all this time he's been the Lord's faithful servant to guide his people Israel in their punitive wandering through desert wasteland of the Sinai Peninsula. And it needs to be said that isn't his fault they didn't get to go into the land forty years earlier when they first had the opportunity. He wanted nothing more than to go in and take possession as the Lord had directed. But the people he was leading rebelled. They were afraid of the nations who already lived in the land – afraid that the Lord would not give them victory in battle and not drive out the Canaanites before them as he had promised. Moses told them, "You've got to be kidding! You saw what the Lord did to the Egyptians, what with the plagues and the Red Sea falling on and drowning Pharaoh's army. How can you even begin to think that the Lord will not be with us now?" But it was no good. They weren't budging. And so the Lord told them, "Fine. You don't trust me? Then go back into the desert until you learn to. Forty years ought to do it. Forty years of me miraculously providing for all your needs every day in a place without food or water ... maybe by then you'll learn the lesson that Moses already knows."

Unfortunately for Moses, since he was their leader, he had to go with them. And I don't imagine a day went by that he didn't think, "If they had only listened to me, if they had only trusted the Lord, we could all be sitting by cool streams in shady groves eating fresh fruit from our orchards and drinking sweet wine from our vineyards; but nooo, for us it's decades of manna and water in the thorny scrub-brush, sand, and hot sun." And that wasn't the worst of it. Even though it was their fault they had to stay in the desert, the people still grumbled against Moses. Everything that went wrong they blamed on him. They even blamed the things that went right on him inasmuch as it was never good enough. They always found fault. They always grumbled against Moses and the Lord – for forty long years. The most remarkable thing in this morning's text is where it says that the people wept for Moses after he died. The way they treated him, you'd think they'd be glad he was gone.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We're still with Moses on top of Mount Nebo surveying the width and breadth of the Promised Land – the land Moses himself has been prohibited from entering. It begs the question, why? Why is it that this man who has been so faithful to the Lord, who was the Lord's instrument to deliver his people from

slavery in Egypt, who went to the top of Sinai to bring down God's holy Law to them, and who has now faithfully led the Lord's obstinate and ungrateful people despite their constant whining and attacks on his person – why is it that he is excluded from entering the land he's long dreamed of while all these others who have done their level best to make his life miserable get to go in?

The answer, if you don't know it already, may surprise you. In a word, Moses sinned. It happened just a few weeks before the very end of their forty years in the desert. The Lord led his people to a place where there was no natural water source immediately available, and they began at once to throw one of their famous fits of faithlessness. It was practically their last opportunity to wail their favorite choruses: "Oh, woe are we! The Lord led us out here to die!" "We should have stayed in jolly ol' Egypt." "Man, that Moses is an idiot! How could we have been so foolish as to follow him?" Hearing their complaints (again), the Lord told Moses to go to a certain outcropping of rock and simply speak to it. "Command water to spring forth and it will. Then the people can drink all they want." They were simple enough instructions; but Moses was fed up with the people's complaints. After all these years, he snapped. He completely lost his temper, and yelled at them, "How can you be so faithless? In all this time have you learned nothing? Have we ever gone without, even once? Hasn't the Lord always made sure that we had enough food and water? You want water? Here, I'll get you water from this rock!" And in his fury, instead of speaking to the rock as he had been directed, Moses struck it with his staff. Immediately water gushed forth and the people drank their fill. But the Lord said to Moses, "That's not what I told to do. And it's going to cost you the Promised Land. You may not enter it."

Talk about taking a punch in the gut. I can well imagine Moses standing there sputtering, "But – but – but I was only defending your honor – upholding the goodness of your name! How is it that you can tolerate all *their* rebellion and sin; but I step out of line just once – only a little – and for what I thought was a good cause – and now *I* can't go into the Promised Land, *but they can?*"

You've got to admit that it doesn't sound right. It seems out of character for the Lord suddenly to be so hardnosed. What happened to his compassion, grace, and forgiveness? And why don't they apply to Moses; but they do to everyone else? Where's the justice here?

Interestingly enough, it is precisely the Lord's justice that's on display here. And it's put forth in a story designed to disturb us so that we sit up and take notice. Wherever you've got a biblical story that makes you scratch your head, you can be sure the Lord has a message he wants you to take to heart.

What's the message here? The simple and most direct message is this: one sin is all it takes. The text is emphatic: there's never been a guy like Moses. He stands head and shoulders above the rest of the Old Testament saints and prophets. No one else knew the Lord and spoke to him face to face like Moses did. Through no other person did the Lord work such mighty miracles of salvation. And yet for all that – and for all the trouble and abuse he was put through that he patiently endured in his work for the Lord – in the end just one seemingly little sin kept him out of the Promised Land. And since that's true of Moses, where does that leave you? If a guy like Moses can't go into the earthly Promised Land – a mere picture of things to come – on account of *one* sin;

how can you whose sins are so much greater and more numerous ever hope to qualify for the eternal Promised Land?

There's no way – which is the point. You see, we usually try to minimize the guilt and consequences of our sin. We imagine that the Lord is able to overlook our minor offenses and the ones we're provoked by difficult or trying circumstances into committing. This story reminds us that every sin is deadly serious business, and that there is no such thing as a little or excusable sin. According to God's justice, there are only damnable sins; sins that rob us of inheriting the goal of eternal life in heaven. And so, if we learn nothing else from this episode let it be this: that we understand that each and every sin we commit is always hateful to God and destructive to ourselves and others.

But like so many of the stories in the Old Testament, there's more going on here. If we take a step back, we'll see a bigger picture emerge. It's this: in the years that follow, Moses becomes the national hero of Israel and later of the Jewish people in particular. As the great Lawgiver, the one who carried the stone tablets down from Sinai, his name becomes pretty much synonymous with the Law. And subsequent generations of God's people – like those living at the time of Christ – believed that the way to inherit eternal life was to obey the laws that Moses commanded. And that was indeed the promise. God said obey the Law and you'll live. The trouble was that this promise was conditional. You only get to live *if* you keep the whole Law; that is, if you follow Moses completely.

And again, there were at the time of Christ people who imagined that they were doing just that – just as there are people today who think the same thing. But the futility of this approach is built into the story. How many people does Moses lead into the Promised Land? Not one. Oh, he can get them started. He can guide them along the way. He can even raise them up and show them what the desired goal looks like. The Law can do all of that. But it can't deliver on the promise. No one gets into the Promised Land by following Moses – that is, by keeping the Law – because all have sinned and fall short of the goal. Those who try to get in by following Moses end up where he did: in an unmarked grave lost forever outside the Promised Land.

As a matter of fact, no one gets into the Promised Land while Moses is still alive. That's important, because our text says that even though Moses was 120 years old – in a day when 70 or 80 years was counted the upper limit – he was still going strong: "his eye undimmed and his strength unabated." It's a picture of how the Law never loses its strength and power. It doesn't change or weaken over time. It's in full force no matter how old it gets.

It only loses its power when God ends it – just as God put an end to Moses' life. And there's something profoundly Christological going on here as Moses, the faithful servant and deliverer and teacher of God's people dies before *anyone* is allowed to go into the Promised Land. It's the end of the Law and its power, as it were, that opens the way for sinners to go in. So Moses emerges as a picture of Christ himself. He's the one who, like Moses, delivers us from bondage, fills us with God's Word, and leads and guides us through the wasteland of this life. And like Moses, he's made to bear our grumbling, insults, and rebellion against him all along the way. But where Moses dies for his own sin; Christ dies for all of ours. And when he does the power of the Law to accuse us and keep us out of the Promised Land dies with him.

Jesus is for us then, the end of the Law and the beginning of something else entirely. This too we see in today's story, as it is not Moses but Joshua – the Old Testament name for Jesus – who ultimately leads the people into the Promised Land. The idea is that we no longer look to the Law to lead us; but rather to Christ who kept the Law for us. Trusting in him and following in his footsteps we are guaranteed entry into our eternal home.

And Moses? I wouldn't worry about him. I said before that I felt sorry for him; but I think the Lord has more than made it up to him. It's true that in this life and for the sake of making a point he didn't get to go into the land he had his heart set on. Instead, the Lord took him to a far, far better place. And in this morning's Gospel reading, we see him standing with Jesus in the earthly Promised Land; so he ultimately got that wish fulfilled too – though I don't image it means that much to him anymore since he's already received a much greater inheritance. The important thing to see is that just as Moses got of preview of the goal he longed for at Mount Nebo, on the Mount of Transfiguration we all get a preview of the glory we will one day share with Christ our Lord and Savior. Moses has already entered that glory, together with all the saints who have gone before us who died in faith trusting that Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe in him and the sacrifice he made for us. May our gracious God and Father ensure that we too are faithful to him until the end that we too may share in his glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***