

Sermon: A Good Death

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 29, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Is it possible that you live under a delusion? You think that you are kind, approachable and gracious when you really are not. You think you are building positive and lasting influence with your children, but if you ever get a chance to check in on them twenty years from now, you would be shocked. Have you ever wonder what would your obituary read like? Who would write it, and what would it say? Have you ever wonder how do people really see you? Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, got a taste of that.

On the morning of 1888, Nobel awoke to read his own obituary in the paper. You see, it was printed as a result of a simple error. Alfred's brother had died, and a reporter carelessly reported the death of the wrong brother. But the shock to Alfred was overwhelming, because he got to see himself as the world saw him...the 'Dynamite King'. Sure, the great industrialist had made a fortune from explosives, but he also worked hard to break down barriers that separated humanity. He had worked hard for peace. But as far as the public was concerned, Alfred Nobel was simply a merchant of death. For that alone he would be remembered.

As Alfred read his own obituary with horror, he resolved to alter, to make clear to the world the true purpose and lasting legacy of his life. In his last will and testament, he endowed five annual prizes for outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and of course peace (the sixth category of economics was added later). It would become an expression of his life's ideals, and ultimately would become how the world remembers him...the 'Nobel Prize'.

Death is not the end. For a person of faith, death is not to be feared, for we know where we are going—that is the kingdom of God, and we know who is mediating on our behalf—that is Jesus Christ. Death has no power over us, yet death still haunts us, grips us—death still stings.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson contents that the work of a pastor is to prepare people for a 'good death'. A good death? That sound oxymoronic but Peterson has got a point. Death is the inevitability of all

living beings. All creatures die, eventually. The question is how does one die will, that would reflect on how one is remembered to have lived well. The answer, you will find not surprisingly, is in God's hand, for the Lord knows how we are made, and God remembers that we are dust.

Our Scripture reading today takes us to the death of Moses, in Deuteronomy 34, a fitting conclusion to the ten-part sermon series on Exodus. The first thing of note is that God set a limit to the life of Moses. Specifically God took him to the top of Mount Nebo, which is opposite to Jericho, then God showed him the whole Promised Land.

I was there in 2019 during my trip to the Holy Land. I stood, probably, where Moses did on Mount Nebo, although I didn't have to work too hard to earn the view. And the view was spectacular, a panoramic view of the land west of Jordan, simply magnificent.

In verse 4, the Lord said to him, "*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 eyes, but you shall not cross over there.*"

God's refusal to allow Moses to cross into the Promised Land traces back to a curious episode in Numbers 20, when the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron about the lack of water. It was not the first time this happened during their long 40 long years of wandering in the wilderness. Previously, God had instructed Moses to strike a rock with his staff to bring out water from the rock, but this time, God instructed Moses to command the rock—an instruction Moses failed to follow to the letter, as he struck the rock with his staff.

The Scripture does not explain the key difference between commanding the rock to yield water and striking it for the same result. But God's reaction was swift and stark, accusing Moses of lacking in trust, thus promising him that he shall not bring the Israelites into the Promised Land. On the surface, setting such a limit appears to be a form of punishment from the Lord, and I suspect most preachers would have no difficulty in preaching a sermon on the virtue of obedience vs the vice of disobedience. However, today, I am taking a different track. I will argue, with four signs, that God was actually being gracious to Moses by not permitting him to cross the river Jordan.

I will begin the first sign by stating the 'land of milk and honey', even the use of such terminology had created unrealistic expectations that simply cannot be met by the reality on the ground. It is no different than when you watch a movie that has been hyped up by the social media (think

of the recent film 'Barbie')—the more the hype the bigger the let down. After 40 years of expecting and hoping and striving for and towards the Promised Land, the actual land is anything but flowing with milk and honey. It was dry, arid, populated with unfriendly 'giants'. The Israelites would have to actually conquer it, to earn it, to tame it, and to work it. By setting limit for Moses, God was essentially saying to him...your work is done, and it is a job well done.

The second sign that God was gracious to Moses, we find in verse 7: *“Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired, and his vigour had not abated.”* For the first 40 years of his life, Moses was born a Hebrew slave, but lived as an Egyptian prince. He was full of youthful vigour yet lacking wisdom and self control. For the next 40 years, at the prime of his life, Moses was a shepherd in the land of Midian, cast out from Egypt but able to enjoy a simple family life, decent, hardworking, yet unremarkable. However, from age 80 to his death at 120, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, through long years in the wilderness, and now at the door step of the promise.

In all, God was at work in his life, always, and God was with Moses through all. How many of us would wish for such a life, and how many more would wish that at the tail end of our lives, our sights be unimpaired, our steps not faltered, and our vigour unabated.

The third sign lies in the fact that God raised up Joshua as the successor to Moses, as in verse 9, *“Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him, and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.”* Joshua was one of the twelve spies that were sent to scout out the land of Canaan, early in the story of Exodus. He was one of two who came back with encouraging report and urged the Israelites to go up and take the land. Joshua, subsequently and for the next forty years, stayed close to Moses, and became his de facto right-hand man. There is nothing more comforting in knowing that one's legacy will continue, continue in good and capable hand, and continue with the blessings of the Lord.

And the final sign: Moses was buried by God in a valley where no one else knew. I think he was the first and the only person in the Bible accorded such an honour. It certainly speaks of an intimate relationship between God and Moses, but I think there is something else more. I believe God did so for the good of the Israelites, so there would be no possibility of any form of occult worship.

For a people who spent 400 years living in the land Egypt, where death and afterlife was a major fascination, where pyramids and elaborate tombs were constructed for departed Pharaohs, there was a real possibility that the burial place of Moses would have become an object of occult worship. It would have distracted the Israelites, (here I am thinking that episode of the golden calf) from the true and proper worship of the one true God, and that would have been most unfortunate.

So God took Moses away, buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, at a location unknown, but leaving us with this description of utmost honour, in Deuteronomy 34:10-12, "*Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.*" It was a good death, a gracious death accorded by God, and I don't think anyone else could've ask for more.

I will leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul, who's manner of death was not recorded in the Bible, but still leaving us with these beautiful words at the tail-end of his life, recorded in 2 Timothy 4, 7-8, "*I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*" Yes, Lord, we too long for your appearing.

As for me, my version of a good death has been fairly consistent, it hasn't changed much over the years. I don't particular care for what my obituary would say, but I do care about what the Lord God would say. My hope is on that fateful day, God would welcome me into His Kingdom, as Christ Jesus would put his arm around me, perhaps pat me on the back and said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share rejoice with me."

That's my good death! What is yours?

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Amen.