

OPENING:

In our Old Testament lesson earlier, we heard of a leadership transition, and we also have a leadership transition coming up here at St. Timothy's next week, so I am choosing to preach from Deuteronomy this morning.

In doing so, I do not mean to put myself and other St. Tim's clergy on the same level as Moses and Joshua.

Me and the folks whose picture line the hallway outside the choir room, are not "full of the spirit of wisdom" like Joshua, or capable of the "signs and wonders," & "the mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power" that Moses did.

But here goes:

Our Old Testament reading ends the book of Deuteronomy, and it ends the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

and it also relates the end of Moses' life.

Now Moses was supposed to have written these first five books of the Bible, including Deuteronomy, and so the question comes:

"how was he able to write down how he died?"

There are some explanations:

1) One is that *Joshua* picked up the pen, as Moses' successor, and completed the book.

2) Another is that Moses wrote it through his very tears, that he completed Deuteronomy as he himself died.

3) And the final one, even more is beautiful, it's that God Godself, seeing that Moses was about to die, picked up the pen and finished it for him.

If so, it was the final expression of how much God loved his servant Moses, someone who God had lifted up and chosen and walked with and struggled with for those 120 years.

For Moses—a prophet like no other—God finished the chapter himself.

God knew Moses "face to face"... our translation has it, but it's literally "mouth to mouth"

And so, the legend goes, that God finished the book, closed Moses' eyes, and kissed Moses on the mouth, as God buried him in the land of Moab.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION:

If only every organization could have as a poetic, and as moving, a goodbye for a leader and a loved one...

If only every organization could anoint a successor in the same way as Moses does Joshua.

For my Celebration of New Ministry next week, I chose to have read another story from Moses' life—the one where Moses tells God that he cannot possibly be the leader that God wants him to be, because he is not up to the task as he is slow of speech.¹

I chose it to remind myself, and all of us, that God calls us regardless of our imperfections and of our unsuitability for the task.

That my and your vocation, our callings, are less about us and more about God.

I also chose it based on how God answers. God responds to Moses' protestations by saying: "okay you think that you cannot do the job.... Let's think of someone else."

For next Sunday, I have invited the Reverend Doctor Ralph Bayfield, the 17th Rector of St. Timothy's, to proclaim the Gospel, to be the 'Aaron' for the occasion, on my behalf and on yours.

Compared to him, we are all "slow of speech, slow of tongue." we all lack eloquence.

When I called him up to ask him to read the Gospel for the service, he said yes and asked me which reading it was, and I said I had not chosen it yet.

And... if you know Ralph this is not surprising... he then said:

"Charles would you like *me* to pick it for you?" And then he caught himself and said: "You are the one becoming the Rector, you pick."

I have had the privilege to get to know Ralph and I have felt him, metaphorically, laying his hands upon me.

In our life together as a parish, I hope that ministry and leadership in this church is

¹ Exodus 4:10-17

passed on like that. With a sense of sharing, and a finality, without holding out too long, and with providing the next person with one's blessing and expertise and then stepping away.

Churches struggle with this sometimes. Everyone is familiar with the organist or musician, way past his/ her prime (this could never be Todd, which is why I am using it as an example) who is missing notes, but has had decades of service, so no one has the courage to tell the truth.

Or the leader who is very much in their prime, who holds on to the position so tightly that no one else can share it.

MOSES:

Contrast that with Moses, who sets Joshua up and then exits 'stage mountain.'

Someone once compared Moses in our story to an animal who knows it's going to die, and so leaves the herd and goes off to die by themselves.

The fact that Moses never got to see the Promised Land, that he spent 120 years on this earth working for a stiff-neck people, but he only got to catch this glimpse of what he had been working for all his life, makes this a heart-breaking story.

At this year's Annual Meeting, I mentioned that the most common question I get from church members as well, members of the larger community, is:

"How's Father Brad doing?"

I have been thinking about the 18th Rector of St. Timothy's Church a lot, obviously, with my Celebration of New Ministry coming up.

I was not here, nor were many of you, but I know that that leadership transition did not go well. That as Brad was suffering from his illness, and he had to retire, and he could not continue to even be a member of this church, I know that there was pain and there was hurt.

I cannot do anything, really, about what happened back then, almost a decade ago now, any more than I can reverse the progress of his illness.

What I *have done* is have conversations with his family and meetings with your Vestry and discussions with the Diocese. We talked and thought and prayed about: how you might honor a leader who meant so much to a community, but never got that recognition, never got what Moses got here in Deuteronomy, this valediction.

So this week, myself and Keith Sinclair, our lay delegate, head to the 229th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Virginia in Fredericksburg. There, we will be presenting a Resolution to those present honoring The Reverend Brad Rundlett and naming him *Rector Emeritus* of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church (Herndon, Virginia). The Vestry voted unanimously to take this action, Brad's family has given their blessing, and I am sure that the Diocese will approve it.

What does it mean?

This does not repair the hurt that happened, or make everything hunky dory with the Diocese, but it's a step in honoring this person who meant so much to his parish. It's telling the truth about who we are as a community of faith.

CLERICALISM

Now there is always the risk of venerating our leaders overly so. I am acutely aware of this considering next week's service. It's a little much sometimes from my perspective. But it's also a great honor and privilege to join in this succession and be the 20th Rector in this long line of prophets and servants, who were also saints and sinners.

That danger of fixating on past leaders, by the way, is why God obscures Moses' grave. We worship a Jealous God who wants his relationship unmediated. We had a Protestant Reformation about this very issue, actually. In the end, it's through Scripture, through Torah, and through the Person of Jesus Christ, that we behold God, face to face. Mouth to mouth even.

CONCLUSION

The names Rundlett and Bayfield (and Henry and Bardusch and Cowherd) will continue to change, but this parish will continue to grow, because it's roots are so deep, and God is present to all of us.

In the end, famously, Moses does not get to see the promised land, neither do we, we are always living into the covenant God has made for us, in a world wracked by violence and in our own lives, we approach these transitions with hope and prayer and faith, knowing that the Promised Land is both here and now, St. Timothy's is Back and we are doing God's work,

AND it is just there on the horizon, right around the corner, waiting for the next group to seize it.

AMEN