

SERMON 891

October 26, 2014

20th Sunday after Pentecost

969th Week as Priest

796th Week at St Dunstan's

61st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

LOOKING BACK ON LIFE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Moses is the great hero of the Hebrew Scriptures. He was the unlikely leader of his people, raised by Pharaoh's daughter, sent by God to strive with Pharaoh and bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Moses led the stiff-necked and stubborn Hebrews through the wilderness to the Land of Canaan. It was the land promised by God to Abraham and his offspring forever.

And after a lifetime of struggle and suffering, of courageous action and enduring faithfulness to God, Moses was taken up to the heights of Mount Nebo, to the pinnacle of Pisgah, where YHWH, known only to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM," this Jealous God of the Desert, told Moses that he would not enter into the Promised Land. And there on the holy

mountain, he died, looking over into the land of milk and honey.

The land had been promised by God as an everlasting covenant to the Patriarchs—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—but it was not to belong to Moses, the great hero of Israel. The people would take the land, but it would be Joshua who would lead them, Joshua whom Moses had laid his hands upon.

Moses was the servant of the Lord, whom the Lord knew face to face. Never was there a prophet like Moses. But Moses never set foot in Canaan.

I wonder how he felt as he looked back over his life and the length of his days. Did he feel a sense of accomplishment about what he had done? Did Moses see his life as something worthy of God? Or did he consider his days cut short, his work unfinished, his efforts incomplete?

The Psalmist reminds us that the Lord's time is quite different from our own reckoning:

For a thousand years in your sight
Are like yesterday when it is past
And like a watch in the night.

We have no assurance that there will be time and opportunity to do all that we dream of accomplishing. There are no guarantees except for the day that we are given.

You turn us back to the dust and say,
“Go back, O child of earth.”

God is eternal, existing from before time and always, and we are mortal.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or the land and the earth were born,
From age to age you are God.

We live in a kind of holy uncertainty. Resting in God’s hand, protected in God’s presence, but we know that our days are limited, and we do not know their length. The Psalmist said,

You sweep us away like a dream;
We fade away suddenly like the grass.
In the morning it is green and flourishes;
In the evening it is dried up and withered.

So given the fragile and uncertain nature of life, and acknowledging that we have no power to lengthen our days or to extend our lives, beyond the present capabilities and skills of modern medicine, how are we to live from day to day?

For me, the answer lies clearly in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew. After all, if we consider the Great Commandment and its importance for each of us, we should recognize that it is the compass of our life's journey. Jesus was asked, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He answered,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.

This was not original with our Lord. No, the words were quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy, and they are known as the Shema. For the Jews to this day, the call to love the Lord is a total commitment of self—heart, soul, mind, and body. This love is undivided. It is complete and compelling, and it must guide the words and actions of each day we are given.

But Jesus said more, and this time he was quoting from the Book of Leviticus:

And a second is like it, said Jesus. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

If you are disturbed and worried about the uncertainty of life, if you are afraid of the fragile nature of this life, and you

are feeling like a victim of the human condition, if you are worried about the worthiness and the validity of the life that you have lived, then commit yourself without hesitation, without any reservation or qualification, to this Great Commandment.

Love God with all that you have and all that you are. Love God with a consuming passion and a full heart. And love your neighbor—who is the person next to you, and the stranger you will speak with today—as you love yourself.

This is the antidote for fear. It is the word of courage and conviction that is in your heart and mind. This kind of love conquers every kind of guilt, every nuance of shame. This love for God and neighbor—starting this day and lived out in your daily life for whatever length of days and years—will be full and sufficient for you to rejoice and be glad all the days of your life. Live in this way, and you will be able to look over into the Promised Land without regret or disappointment—rather with praise and thanksgiving for the life you have lived. **AMEN.**