

Rev. Wm. Blake Spencer Deut 34:1-12/Mtt 22:34-46 Promised Land and Covenant of Love

I wonder if I will ever say anything or do something that will leave people talking, thinking, feeling, and believing for years, or even generations to come. I wonder how it happens....that a particular set of words or actions lived by one person causes enough fervor to be remembered by others long after their death. What does it take to be remembered in this way?

It's not hard for names of people known for what they said and lived to pop into our heads, even as we sit in this moment; people known for pushing us to do the right thing, for loving others in ways we will not forget....and some who spoke and lived their lives as a reminder of the worst we humans are capable of doing.

Some people are remembered for what they said and what they lived.

I suppose we all want to be known for something. I suppose most of us long to be known for living in a way that makes a positive impact on others. Even though the reality is that most of us will only speak and live in ways known by a small circle of people....we are still left to wonder if we will make any kind of difference in this world.

As I thought about people this past week I remembered those who lived in big and small ways in my life.

Like many of us I remember John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa. I also will never forget the likes of Red Skelton and Lucille Ball. But I also remember people like Mrs. Browder....my third grade music teacher.

She simply was teaching a few young children living in the East Texas Piney woods, doing her job from day to day....and I wonder if she ever knew the impact she left on me....and most likely others like me.

She brought alive stories and music from Broadway musicals, Irish folk dancing and songs from around the world. We learned to dance the jig, and sing ancient carols and heard about those musical giants who left legacies to be forever remembered.

But it is Mrs. Browder I remember the most....because she took the time to sit and listen and encouraged us to explore and enjoy.

Her words set into motion the invitation to live past the realities of our small Texas town and to grab hold of the bigger story of our world community.....and she did all of this without technology....no gadgets, programs or internet. Mrs. Browder simply used her voice and her presence....and I will never forget her.

The two passages we encounter from both testaments of scripture present episodes of God's story that leave lasting impressions....so much so we continue to talk about and speak the

stories thousands and thousands of years later. Moses standing on one side and Jesus on the other unfolding before us the realities of God's intentions for this creation brought to life and sustained by God's Holy breath.

Moses has paid his dues by the time we come to this moment in the Holy story....really these are the last moments of his life. With agonizing detail we've journeyed with the former Hebrew slaves through the wilderness. We've heard their complaining and worrying with vivid clarity....because like them we've uttered the same kinds of things in our own life journeys.

These former slaves have been wandering and wondering for generations and now they are on the verge of becoming the nation of Israel.....Now they are about to walk into the land of promise and become the people and the story of God's covenant.

In this scene the people are still waiting...as Moses literally stands on the edge of what has been and what is about to be. The promise God has spoken for generations.... is now before him in panoramic living color.

And in the most bitter sweet of moments, standing in the glory of God's promise to be fulfilled....Moses gets the memo: "Memo / From: God To: Moses: RE: Some fine print you might have forgotten about..."

"I am letting you see the land, Moses....the land I promised Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca....but this is as far as you get to go....this is as close as you get to get. You won't be walking with the others into the land."

We can only imagine what Moses is thinking. "Really, God....this is it.....I did all the things you asked of me and this is it. I only get to see the Promised Land....I don't get to go into the land! Really, after all this time...after everything we've been through....and all I get to do is see the land"

And with this, Moses dies.

It's time to remember a detail back in the book named Numbers....Moses may have forgotten....but it is clearly stated.....God says to Moses after not having trusting God to take care of the people.... "Because you did not trust me....to show my glory and power....you will not be the one to walk the people into the land."

So is this punishment? Or is there a bigger story at play?

If there is anything we've learned from the story of the wandering Hebrews....it is this. There is always a bigger story at play.

Though God's people, then and now have the tenacity to focus on what is right in front of them....God is always, always pushing us in the direction of the bigger story.

"I know you easily see the obstacles in life....God says....I don't have to name them....you know them all so well.....and yes some of the obstacles seem overwhelming and all consuming....but

hear me out....listen....and hear me again, and again.....I have love enough....love wide and deep and high and far enough to endure any obstacle you might give power to....

I have love enough to endure your persistent worry....love enough to over ride your stubbornness....love enough to comfort your pain....love enough to withstand your moments of arrogant behavior....love enough to remember I knit you together in your mother's womb.....love enough to never forget....I promised to go with you to the very end.

Moses is on one side today and with him we get to see before us the span of God's promise and if you stand there and look long enough and listen.....

God's promise will literally come alive..... for in the land of promise there will come one who speaks and lives what God longs for us to hear and know. Moses is on one side of the promise and Jesus on the other side.

Jesus....standing in our midst.....answering our pointed questions with words that seem so simple....too simple sometimes.....and yet all these generations later and the passage of thousands of years and we still are talking about what Jesus spoke and lived.

We are still trying to figure out this thing called love....why God loves us, how we accept God's love for ourselves, how we love our selves, how we love others....not only how we love the people we like, but how we love the people we don't like....how we love the people who genuinely don't like us....how we love even those who hate us.

See the land of promise is one thing. Living the promise in the land is a whole other matter. We are in the Promised Land my friends. God's promise is alive and relevant right where we are.....and we've been given this heritage, this promise to live.

I'll never forget standing in the room upstairs above the sanctuary....a little room with stained glass windows behind the balcony. Mrs. Lowery greeted us each Sunday morning. The room was neat and orderly. We walked in and Mrs. Lowery stuck a gold star beside our name to indicate our presence....

and then we were guided to a small wooden chair at a table built to size and were given quiet work to accomplish until others had a chance to have their gold star stuck to the poster.

In that room we read Bible stories and we memorized the Children's edition of the Westminster Creed, words written by theologians and church leaders in Great Britain long before any of us in that little class room were born....long before our teacher was born . We stood one at a time in front of the class and recited the questions and answers from the Catechism. Each successful recitation landed us another gold star.

And though we loved getting another gold star it was really the smile and the hug and the words of encouragement Mrs. Lowery offered that filled our soul to overflowing. She was a no nonsense kind of woman, rather strict but her words have lasted throughout my life.

“I’m proud of you, and never forget you are a beloved child of God.”

And I believed her. And I still believe her. And her words have gone before me in this journey called ordained ministry....and her words have reminded me again and again the bigger story of God’s love. Her words have been a source of peace when facing obstacles of my own doing and the doing of others. She spoke words I will never forget.... “Don’t ever forget, you are a beloved child of God.”

This faith journey is not easy....We are called to give up our spot in the front of the line to the one who is last, turn our cheek and give up our coat, share our food and give power to the weak, love those who do not love us.”

And though we might have a gold star to prove our ability to speak words of faith....we fail again and again to live what we say we believe.....and yet God is tenacious and persistent, patient and compassionate.

And though we get it more wrong than right....we remain in the midst of God’s grace.

This ministry, this faith is not about us....it’s about the one who created us and called us. This ministry, this faith is about the one who loves us....and it is about the journey of being loved and the willingness to love.

For we have inherited more than a plot of land....we have inherited a life of love to live in the land.

So hear the words that continue to be spoken from generation to generation:

“My dear ones....never forget you are a beloved child of God.”

For if we can know that we are loved....we will better be able to love.

We are the ones left in this land filled with the promise of God’s love.

We are the ones left to love as God has loved us.

So how will our words and lives be remembered. Will we be remembered because we had the courage and joy enough to love in ways the world does not love?