**Sermon:** Proper 25A
**Title:** Faith Larger than Giants
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On first glance, our reading from the Hebrew Bible this week seems a little cold and uninspiring by comparison with the Gospel. But this story of Moses, the Israelites, and Joshua, son of Nun is among the most resonant, the most emotional, and the most enduring of the stories of the early books of the Hebrew Bible.

You will remember that Moses followed God's instruction and guided the Israelites out of bondage and has been leading them in the wilderness for generations. In our text today, we learn that he has now been called by the Lord and has to pass his leadership to someone else.

This is the first emotional sign post in this story. How difficult it must have been for Moses to hear that the people to whom he had dedicated his life, will journey into the promised land without him. I wonder what he felt. Was he angry with God? After all he had endured verbal abuse from the unhappy Israelites, he had journeyed in faith with no idea how he would provide for them. He had struck a rock with his stick (that had to hurt), walked up into a cloudy mountain (unpleasant), and bargained with God for the safekeeping of these peoples (he should get extra points for that). Not to mention walking miles, every single day, in sandals in the sand.

How difficult then to turn over their safekeeping to someone else. How difficult to never see the promised land himself?

I relate to this passage personally. Three summers of my life were spent as a hospital Chaplain in a level one trauma unit in suburban Chicago. This is part of the formation of a priest called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), at the end of which I was board certified as a hospital Chaplain. Hospital Chaplaincy is easily the closest any priest gets to the Holy One on a daily, even hourly, and intensive, basis. Many priests will tell you that it is the most formative element of all of their education. While I did not become a priest until Bishop Jeffrey Lee placed his hands on me years later, I felt ordained in moments when families shared their suffering with me, when the senselessness of violence, criminality, and death were present in cacophonous ER bays with canvas curtain walls or sterile waiting rooms in the emergency department.

But I never wanted to be a hospital Chaplain full-time. Because every time someone walked into an emergency department in crisis, I fell a little bit in love with them. Even if I was only with them for a few hours, some part of me was invested in their welfare, in their story. They would frequently be transferred to another unit and often be out of the hospital before my shift was over. Even if they stayed longer, I never knew how their story ended. To this day, I wonder about babies who were born, families that were fragmented, miraculous medical

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interventions, and how they changed the lives of those people. I will never know. Like Moses, I journeyed hard terrain with a flock that I loved, but I never knew how their stories ended.

Does this story resonate with you? Have you ever had to step away from relationships you have invested in? Have you left a position or a place out of necessity before you were ready? What did *you* feel?

Moses is asked to hand his leadership to Joshua, son of Nun. Joshua was one of the spies who was sent forward to reconnoiter the threats that might be found in the land of Canaan. He and others went to spy, and when they returned many of the spies reported that there were giants in the land. Filled with fear, they begged the leadership of the Israelites, not to try to go to battle against them. But Joshua said, "Our God is a great God, if God is with us, who will win against us?" Joshua's faith in God was greater even than the giants. So it comes as no surprise to the reader of Deuteronomy that Joshua is handed the staff and invited to lead the community into the promised land.

I had a Joshua-year. After 26 years of marriage, I found myself a single mom with three, and then four, children to raise in my three bedroom apartment. I had financial concerns, of course, and these were teenagers, and their emotional stability was, at the best of times, only precarious. This had not been among my plans for my life or my plans for their childhood. I did not feel equipped, I did not even really know how this had happened to me.

My faith in God was larger than the giants, who dripped poison in my ear when I lay awake at night. I was handed the staff, God had confidence in me. And in the words of Saint Paul, "If God be with us … we are more than conquerors."

Have you ever been placed in a position for which you feel illequipped? Have you ever stepped into the void of leadership wondering how this happened? Have you ever looked up to heaven and whispered, "Me?" Has God ever had more confidence in you than you did in yourself?

And then, finally, we learned that Moses, who was the greatest of all leaders, a profit, unlike any other, who the Lord knew, face-to-face, was buried in an unmarked grave.

How devastating for the Israelite people not to be able to go and remember this man whom they loved so greatly at the spot where his remains are buried. Have you ever had to say goodbye to someone without ever being able to say the words? Have you lost people, to death or circumstances, without closure? Who among us has not? Imagine, then, how the Israelites cried out to God in the night when they learned that Moses was gone and no memorial stood in his place.

Whenever we reread scripture we are invited to do more than imagine that we are the person talking to Jesus, or the bystander. We are invited to think about how we are <u>all</u> the characters

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in every story. How we are Moses, Joshua, and the Israelite people. How we are Pharisees, Philistines, Disciples, and, yes, even Jesus.

I often say that the Holy Bible is a love letter from God. It is a collection of stories that remind us that God knows us, cares about us, and loves us. Not just now, but always. It is a 3,000+ year old list of the times that God was present with us in our daily lives. And it is a timeless assurance that God will also always be there as we make our own journeys toward the Promised Land. Amen.

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