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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

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Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

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

Friends, greetings from Austin, Texas. It's my delight to join you today digitally. I want to share with you a good word based on the first lesson for today from the Book of Deuteronomy. It is a sermon titled, Look for the Blessing.

The 34th chapter of Deuteronomy tells us about the death of Moses, the servant of God. After forty years wandering in the desert, the People of Israel were about to enter the promised land.

Moses, the man of God, sensed he was about to die, and he gathered the people to bid them farewell. Moses prayed a blessing upon the people on the plains of Moab. Then, God called him to climb Mount Nebo.

Moses climbed the mountain – and there God spoke to him one last time. On the summit of Mount Nebo, God showed Moses the promised land. Starting in the east, God showed him all the land from Gilead to Dan, all Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh, all of Judah leading to the Mediterranean Sea, and finally Jericho, on the other side of the Jordan. From there, Moses got an incredible view of what is today Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank.

After showing him the promised land, God said to Moses, “This is the land I promised your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Then, God added, “I’ve let you see it with your own eyes. There it is. But you’re not going to go in.”

After so many years yearning for the promised land, Moses looked over it, but was did not enter it.

Verse 5 tells us that Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there, in the land of Moab. Just as God said. Another translation says, Moses died there, as God commanded. That's Malarkey! When I read this passage in preparation for this sermon, I was filled with sadness for Moses and outrage with God. I wondered whether Moses was disappointed not to enter the promised land. Was Moses upset with God? I am not sure about Mo, but I was feeling sorry for him. The People of Israel had been in slavery for 430 years, and it was my man Mo who helped God delivered them from Pharaoh's hand. Moses, the bi-cultural prophet. He was born Hebrew, and raised Egyptian. He had a heart for his people and spoke Pharaoh's language. God enacted 10 plagues through Moses and performed many wonders. If Moses

was not deemed worthy to enter the promised land, if God had rejected his servant Moses, how could there be any hope for any of us?

When I shared my outrage with my wife, Julie, who is also a seminarian at Southwest, she reminded me of something we had learned in Ethics class: “Human beings are created for blessing. Look for the blessing in the story.” I had missed the blessing in the story. Perhaps, I assumed a happy ending for Mo meant personal fulfillment. I wanted a happy ending with a triumphant entry into the promised land. And I missed the blessing.

In prayer, I went back to Mount Nebo to spend time with Moses in his final moments. I wanted to see what he saw. To hear what he heard. To feel a bit of what he felt. This time, I wanted to keep in mind the blessing. “Look for the blessing, Santi,” I told myself. “God has created us for blessing. God called Moses up the mountain to bless him - not to reject him. Pay attention.”

Sure enough. God poured one more blessing upon Moses on that mountain. In prayer, I let my holy imagination guide me through Moses’ final moments. The entire scene was intimate and meaningful. I saw Moses, walking up the mountain as the People of Israel sang and cried for him. I heard Moses, on top of Mount Nebo, speaking to God like one friend to another. I beheld God, standing next to Moses as he showed him the promised land.

As Moses looked over the promised land, he also looked back on his life. As images of his life poured into his memory, Moses smiled. He thought of his mother hiding him in a basket by the side of the River Nile. Other images poured in. Being rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter. Fleeing from Egypt. Meeting his wife, Zipporah. The births of his children Gershom and Eliezer. The burning bush. His return to Egypt. God delivering Israel from Pharaoh. More than a million people following Moses out of Egypt. God parting the Red Sea. Receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Wandering in the desert for forty years.

As he looked back on his life, Moses did not think of all the things he had done for God. He saw all the wonders God had worked in his life. Through it all, God was faithful. Moses had seen God face to face. And he knew that God would always be faithful. He knew that he did not get to the top of that mountain on his own. He was following what he discerned was the way of God.

Moses had lived in prayerful discernment. As Moses arrived at the end of his life, there were no regrets. There was no sadness or outrage. No need for one final tweet. There would be no selfie from Mount Nebo. God had brought him to the mountain to pour one more blessing upon him. Like my wife, Moses knew God created us for blessing. A blessing is a gift which allows life to flourish more fully. Moses knew that it was his friendship with God that had made his life flourish more fully. Now, God was about to pour one more blessing upon him. The People of Israel got to enter the promised land, and Moses inherited eternal life with God. Moses got the sweeter deal. His death was not a disappointment. He spoke to God face to face. He had an incredible friendship with God.

Friends, the good news I learned on Mount Nebo is that God created us to bless us. God wants us to flourish more fully. But often, we miss the blessings. Prayer helps us to look for the blessings. True happiness is where the blessing is at. And true happiness is about being in relationship with God. Our loved ones help us to appreciate the blessings. Suffering and struggles help us to recognize the blessings. Even in a year like this! I wonder, if we were to climb Mount Nebo, and God showed us our lives, or even our lives in 2020, what images would flash before us? How have we increased in faith, hope, and love? How have we grown in intimacy with our loved ones? How have we put first things first? How have we flourished more fully? Perhaps you'll see the moments when you choose rest over stress. Or spending time with family over Facebook. Or the moments you held on to hope in troubled times. Or when you kept showing up to virtual worship even when it was hard and you missed your Sunday folks in person. Or the days you chose sanity over the news cycle. Or the times you poured a blessing on someone in deep need.

Look for the blessings. Those are the gifts that strengthen us to carry on. To keep loving. And hoping. And believing. As we look upon the valley of Jericho before us, we know there will be times of uncertainty and struggle. God knows the next two weeks will be bananas! But as we look behind us, as we consider our lives with prayerful discernment, we recognize what Mo knew all along. God is always faithful. God created us to bless us and give us life to the fullest. This season, God is inviting us to consider the blessings we have received, and the ways we can share those gifts with others.

That is what Moses' life was all about. On Mount Nebo, Moses entered the fullness of life. Moses died there. Just as God said. For God pronounced a word of love and invited Moses into his eternal embrace. On that mountain, I AM poured his final blessing upon his servant Moses. The One who delivered him out of the waters of the Nile. The God who called Moses by name in the burning bush. The Holy One who delivered Israel from Egypt. The Mighty One who parted the Red Sea when all seemed lost. The Loving God greeted Moses as an old friend and welcomed him into eternal life.

Friends, God is pouring blessing upon blessing on our lives. Look for the blessings, May the boldness of these blessings strengthen our faith that we may grow in love for God and one another, Amen.