

“The Future Beckons”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, October 25, 2020

Deuteronomy 34 and Psalm 90

Our scripture today is about Moses. And we learn in Deuteronomy 34 that Moses was 120 years old when he died. Remember reading about him as a baby, found in the basket in the bulrushes by Pharaoh’s daughter? What a life Moses lived. All those years in Egypt, and then God called him to be the one to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, out of captivity. And into 40 years of wandering in the desert. And now, with the people about to cross the Jordan to the promised land, God has a talk with Moses.

‘You’re not going with them,’ God says. Your feet will never touch that land. Your tongue will never taste its fruits. Your eyes will never take in its sights and sounds. But God does something extraordinary. He takes Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo. And here is this 120 year-old man who can see for what I estimate to be 120 miles to the north, to the south, and about 70 to the Western sea (today known as the Mediterranean). Moses saw mountains and valleys, rivers and seas. He saw the height and the length and the breadth of the promised land. He saw all of this. How his heart must have been full. And after all the decades he struggled with the people and wrestled with God, putting everything on the line again and again, Moses does not get to the promised land.

Was he angry? Did he resent that he wouldn’t get to put his feet into the waters of the Jordan and cross over to the promised land with everyone else? Knowing that he had brought his people to the edge of the River Jordan, he must have felt like he had done his part, he had accomplished his task, he had got the people to where they needed to be. What had he learned along the way? Psalm 90, which is attributed to Moses, tells us something of what he learned along the way. That God is eternal. That a thousand years in God’s sight are like a few hours in the night. That God has always been a place of refuge, of safety. And at the very end of the prayer, Moses mentions ‘the children’. “Let our work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.” He looks to the next generation who will pick up the torch, carry the baton, continue the race, move into the future. And he asks of God to ‘prosper the work of our hands’, not only our hands, but the hands of our children, the hands of the next generation. For the next generation is always emerging, always evolving. My Jewish Bible notes, “The limited ‘immortality’ of human beings is in their children and their achievements, the work of our hands. The psalmist prays that his own generation and his children’s will be able to rejoice in God’s deeds and that their own hands will prosper, with God’s help.”¹

Moses knows that the same God that led him from his youth to this moment standing on the top of the highest mountain is the same God that will lead his successor, Joshua. It’s interesting to note that Joshua isn’t a young guy. But relative to Moses’ 120, he was young. Estimates are that Joshua was between 68 and 78 when he led the people across the river.² And

¹The Jewish Study Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1371.

² <https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/how-old-was-joshua-when-he-entered-the-promise-land/>

just as God was so powerfully with Moses, God would be powerfully with Joshua. We read in Deuteronomy 31:23, “Then the Lord commissioned Joshua, son of Nun and said, “Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them: I will be with you.” And under this younger leader, the people moved forward.

I was watching an interview with Barbara Amiel by Steve Paikin on Wednesday night, on her newly released book. He was asking her about children and she wistfully said that what she misses by not having children is that she “won’t see through their eyes.”³ *She won’t see through their eyes.* Seeing through the eyes of the young people isn’t a contemporary idea. In the sixth century Rule of St. Benedict, Benedict tells his monastic community, “As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together ... the reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Spirit often reveals what is better to the younger.”⁴

It’s curious when you think of how our culture has given a name to a quick succession of recent generations. I know my father used to say he was a ‘depression kid’. But then the name ‘baby boomers’ became part of our social vocabulary. And then, a quick succession of Generation X, Y, Millennials, and Z.⁵ In quick succession, the culture has felt called to recognize distinct differences that set apart one birth generation from the one previous. Is this because the world is changing so quickly that the values they live by are markedly different from the previous generation? Are things accelerating that quickly?

One example of observable change is the way these newer generations work in terms of community, relationship and connection. It is the distinction between old power versus new power. And it will challenge those of us who live with ‘old power’. Old power is the model that you and I have most likely experienced. Jeremy Heimans describes it like this: “Old power works like a currency. It is held by few. It is leader-drive. It downloads, and keeps. New power on the other hand, operates differently. It is like a current. It is made by many ... Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal ... is not to hoard it but to channel it.”⁶

We’ve had some notable young people who in using this new power challenge the way we see the world, to see the world through their eyes. Malala, Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier come to mind as young women who challenge our eyesight. But it’s more than our eyesight that will be challenged. It’s our way of doing things.

A year ago, our church’s national magazine had a drastic makeover. Known to us fondly as the Observer, editor Jocelyn Bell changed the look, format, content, *and* the name from the beloved ‘Observer’ to ‘Broadview,’ in order to pull it into a new and very different era. Founded in 1829, it is the oldest continuously published magazine in North America. We were shocked at the name change. I even saw it in a Shopper’s Drug Mart magazine rack. It doesn’t smack United Church at all anymore. In fact, you have to look through it to find us. But what Jocelyn has done

³ I recorded the comments while listening to the interview on The Agenda with Steve Paikin, October 21, 2020.

⁴ The Rule of St. Benedict in English (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 25.

⁵ <https://www.drodd.com/html4/generation-names.html>

⁶ Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power: How Anyone Can Persuade, Mobilize, and Succeed in Our Chaotic, Connected Age* (New York: Anchor Books, 2018), 2.

is winning editorial awards. In September's issue, Bell won an award: "The National Magazine Awards presented Jocelyn Bell with the Editor Grand Prix award, for making an outstanding impact on their magazine. The complete re-visioning of Broadview magazine in 2019 was a huge undertaking that required strong editorial leadership ... the degree of difficulty in transforming Canada's longest-publishing magazine was high." Jocelyn, a young woman, is a daughter of a retired United Church minister. She is a bit of conduit between our world and the next world of 'Observer' readers – she seems to sense what it is that needs to be in that magazine to meet the needs of a very different reader than us. Is the new power taking a risk when it changes what the old power considers its contribution? As in you don't tamper with tradition. You don't mess with what we've given you.

When Barbara Amiel said that she would miss not being able to see through the eyes of her children, it made me wonder. What am I missing by not looking through the eyes of not just my children, but young people all around me. This past weekend, in a United Church ordination service held in St. John's, Newfoundland, a very young colleague of mine was ordained. I met Oliver Dingwell seven years ago at a Festival of Homiletics in Nashville. He was probably 16 or 17. He was in the process of applying for theological studies but while at the Festival he wanted to buy a white stole for his ordination. I was so amazed by his confidence. In a radio interview with CBC Newfoundland Morning this past week, Rev. Oliver Dingwell said that he is excited to be a part of God's work in the world. He knew when he was 6 years old that he wanted to be a minister in the United Church of Canada.

People like Oliver, and there are precious few of them, give me such hope for our church, for all churches. That there are young people with eyes to see God's kingdom in all its richness and promise. It's good to see through their eyes. Regardless of the era, the generation, or the millennium, in a time of great change and disruption, the human heart also searches for that place to find rest, to find safe harbour during times of great change.

In his psalm, Moses wrote, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." God will always be that dwelling place; for in the midst of change, God is ever present. Here is Moses' prayer, Psalm 90 in words you will recognize:

Before the hills in order stood, or earth received its frame,
From everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.

O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.
Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.⁷

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ Verses 3, 4 and 6, of "O God, Our Help in Ages Past", Voices United Hymnal 806