

Mount Nebo

TEXT: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 12, 2023

As we climb a variety of mountains during Lent, we have visited two mountains associated with the prophet Elijah. The second mountain, where God paid Elijah a visit, was the same mountain where God paid Moses a visit. But like Elijah, Moses also has two mountains associated with his name—Mt. Sinai/Horeb, the connection he shares with Elijah, and then the last mountain he would ever climb, Mt. Nebo, which is where we'll visit this morning.

We're jumping around chronologically here. Moses lived at least three centuries before Elijah and maybe six. Elijah's timeframe is pretty settled, but there's lots of debate among scholars on when, and for a few even **if**, Moses lived. Nobody agrees about dating early Israelite history until you get to King David around the year 1,000 BCE. Elijah is a century or two after David, so the world described in the stories about him has some external documentation. But Moses was anywhere from two to five centuries before David, leaving room for a wide range of speculation.

Be that as it may, the central narrative of the entire Old Testament is the story of the Exodus, as God helps Moses lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and back to the place where Abraham and his descendants had lived until famine forced the move to Egypt.

Moses and those who fled Egypt with him go through forty years wandering in the wilderness, fed by God with manna and a bit of quail, to Mt. Sinai where Moses was given the Torah, including the Ten Commandments. Finally, after most of the generation who had left Egypt was dead and gone, they arrive at the border of the Promised Land.

Canaan. The land, it was said, that flowed with milk and honey. The land of their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The land where they would no longer be enslaved but become a nation. The land where they would fulfill their promise, made when they received the Torah at Sinai, to let their lives bear witness to the nature of the God who liberated them so that, through them, God's promise to Abraham—that through his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed—could be fulfilled.

There's a lot riding on this re-entry, and they had brought the bones of Jacob's son Joseph with them from Egypt, the only concrete reminder that any of what they had heard was more than mere legend. Remember, the Israelites had been in Egypt for centuries. And they had traveled the wilderness for generations. But, at long last, here they were, close enough to Canaan now that, if Moses could have called an Uber for them, they could have been at the north end of the Dead Sea in about 35 minutes.

Technically they are in the land of Moab, the place where, a century or two after Moses, a baby girl named Ruth would be born, eventually finding herself in the biblical genealogy of both King David and Jesus and having her story become an entire book of the Bible.

The ancient kingdom of Moab sits in modern-day Jordan, with the country taking its name from the Jordan River, which comprises most of the country's northwestern border. The Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, and a great place to get a panoramic view of the region is at the top of Mt. Nebo, which is also in modern-day Jordan.

Mt. Nebo, like Mt. Carmel, is actually a range, and Pisgah is the name of its pinnacle, at 2,330 ft. above sea level. In addition to the Dead Sea, easily visible from the summit is the palm-treed oasis of Jericho, Bethlehem, and most of what is now the West Bank. If it's a clear day, you can even see Jerusalem.

Framing your view at the top of Mt. Nebo is a thought-provoking statue depicting an amalgam of the bronze serpent on a pole that Moses made to heal the people in the wilderness and Jesus on the cross, remembering

Jesus' words to Nicodemus about the bronze serpent in John 3:14-15. I encourage you to look up a [picture of the statue](#).

When we meet Moses on Mt. Nebo in Deuteronomy 34, he is 120 years old and, Deuteronomy tells us, "His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated." So, just like Moses left the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai to meet God in the fire; so now he goes up Mt. Nebo to get the panoramic view of the land of his ancestors—a land etched in his DNA, but where he had never been. The land God had promised to the wonderful, difficult, faithful, obstinate, all-too-human mass of people he had herded across the dangerous terrain of the Sinai Peninsula.

Moses had been their leader, their judge, their prophet, their shepherd, and the channel for God's voice and God's glory to live among them, and now it's all becoming real. Here they are, generations later. They're now carrying not only the bones of Joseph, but the tablets of the law from Mt. Sinai and the portable Tent of Meeting that they had made at God's instruction for worship as they moved from place to place.

Most importantly, they are carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the gold-plated box that went in the very center of the Tent of Meeting that contained the relics of their time in the wilderness: The tablets of the law, the rod of Moses' brother Aaron that had miraculously budded into flower, and a bit of manna to remember how God had fed them when they were hungry.

The Ark was not just for the storage of relics, however. God's detailed instructions for building it not only made sure it had poles so that it could be carried from place to place along with the tent and legs to keep it off the ground; but it had a golden mercy seat on top of the box, which was, for Moses, a literal seat and, for later worship, the holiest altar in the Temple.

The mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant was the place where God would meet Moses to communicate the Torah and its interpretation to him as Moses served as the judge for the Israelites in the wilderness. Only Moses could bear that presence, and the Bible tells us he had to put a veil over his face when he came out so that others could bear to look at the light coming from Moses. Later high priests would offer the sacrifice of atonement there, but they had to fill the place with incense first, lest they see God and die from the intensity of God's presence. Hold onto that information for next week.

As you know if you watched movies in the 1980's, despite the Ark of the Covenant being Israel's most sacred object, when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple in 587 BCE, the Ark was nowhere to be found. It was supposed to be in the holiest of holies at the very center of the Temple, just like it had been at the center of the Tent of Meeting. But the Babylonians got in there and that room was empty. Where did it go?

The History Channel has lots of interesting theories, but few know that the Bible itself has an answer to that question. It's just not in a book that Protestants generally read. The book of 2 Maccabees, which is not in most Protestant Bibles but remains in the canons of the Catholics and the Orthodox, tells us that both the Tent of Meeting and the Ark with its relics were removed from Solomon's Temple by the prophet Jeremiah before the Babylonians could take the city.

And where did he put them? The account in 2 Maccabees says Jeremiah took them to Mt. Nebo, hid them in a cave, and sealed up the entrance; predicting that the glory of God would descend on them and reveal their location but not "until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy." (2 Maccabees 2:4-8). No one has yet found that cave.

The other thing no one has ever found is the tomb of Moses, because—unlike with Mt. Sinai—Moses never came back down from Mt. Nebo. Deuteronomy tells us he died on the mountain and was buried, but no one knows where. Maybe God revealed that to Jeremiah and the Ark contains yet another relic in the bones of Moses.

So...wait...what? Moses didn't enter the promised land? Nope. Not even one step in. God shows it to him from the top of the mountain and then, somehow, the man with impeccable eyesight and full of vigor dies there. Maybe the shock of coming all that way and not being allowed to cross over did it.

Or, maybe, just being able to see the land and not having to worry about crossing the border was just a huge relief. Unlike Elijah, Moses had a successor already in place, young Joshua, son of Nun. Joshua was with the people at the base of the mountain and would renew the covenant of Sinai and lead them into their new home starting in the verse immediately following today's passage, at the start of the book of the Bible that bears Joshua's name. So, maybe on Mt. Nebo, having seen the promise for himself, and knowing his flock was in good hands, Moses could, both literally and figuratively, rest in peace.

But mountains are a place of spiritual as well as physical vision. So I find myself wondering if God showed Moses more than just the land from up there. Moses was a prophet; and, back in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Moses had predicted:

"¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' ¹⁷ Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable."

Jews see the fulfillment of that verse in all the prophets of Israel that would come after Moses, including Elijah and Jeremiah. So I wonder...Did God show Moses the future when a dejected and depressed Elijah who would crawl back to Mt. Sinai/Horeb thinking God's covenant was dead in the water?

Did God give Moses a vision about Jeremiah—who lived after Elijah—sneaking back to the mountain under Moses' feet to save the Tent and the Ark that the people below him were about to carry into the Promised Land from destruction by enemy forces?

A fair number of Jews in the first century thought of the prophet like Moses as a Messianic figure; and Christians tend to think the prophet like Moses was Jesus. Did God show Moses the baby girl named Ruth, who would be born of a foreign people in the land where he stood, whose descendants would include Israel's greatest King and a first century rabbi whose message would change the world?

How much and how far did Moses see on top of Mt. Nebo? Could he see a dark-skinned woman on the other side of the world almost twenty centuries later, whose work to free her people from slavery led people to call Harriet Tubman "Moses?" Did Moses see those enslaved people singing songs echoing his own call to Pharaoh to "Let my people go?"

Did he hear in a strange foreign tongue a black disciple of Jesus give a speech, on April 3, 1968, imagining that he stood where Moses did, also on the last night of his life, and proclaiming that going to the mountaintop and seeing the promised land was enough—that he didn't need to enter; he could trust God for the fulfillment after seeing the courage and success of the people thus far.

Did God grant Moses that vision? Was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. also a prophet like Moses? Is the Jewish interpretation perhaps right that the prophet like Moses has come, and will come, again and again, until all peoples are free?

The lesson of Moses on Mt. Nebo, as I see it, is the same message Elijah had to digest on Mt. Horeb, the same message Dr. King learned as he faced imminent threat to his own life, and the same message each of us must learn if we are ever to find satisfaction in our work. That lesson is: It's not actually our work. To the extent that we value love over hate, liberty over oppression, and compassion over cruelty; our lives are merely brief moments when we take up the mantle of Elijah; when we accept the law of Moses; when we commit ourselves to living life as Jesus did and step into the ever-flowing river of God's creative love.

It's all one river from one source. We have not failed if the river is not fully clean at our passing. We have not failed if we never see the whole river. We are not alone, even if we cannot see those who work up or downstream from us. We are not weak or ineffective because the river rapids knock us off our feet. We are

merely stewards of the river in the place and at the time in which we stand in it. Many will stand in the river before us and many will enter when our part is through, but the river flows on.

The first verses of Revelation 22 show us John's vision of the New Jerusalem: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

Maybe Moses saw that, too, at the summit of Mt. Nebo. Maybe that was the Promised Land that Moses chose to enter instead. Amen.