

SERMON SERIES: "20/20 Vision"
SERMON TITLE: "The Vision of a Faithful Past"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 34:1-11,
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 6, 2019, at First UMC (Stewardship Drive)

INTRODUCTION

On Monday, I went to Country Hills Eye Clinic for my annual eye exam. The bad news is that my eyeballs are dry, cataracts are gradually forming, and my vision has gotten worse. The good news is that with some eye drops and these new glasses, I supposedly am now restored to 20/20 vision.

As Lori indicated, today is the first day of our 20/20 Vision Stewardship Drive. For five weeks, we're going to focus on seeing God's vision. We're going to look back in history, look around at where we are in the present time, and look ahead to the year 2020 and beyond. Then we're going to look at our dedication and generosity to the ministry of God in and through First United Methodist Church.

To help us see that 20/20 vision, over the next several weeks we're mostly going to focus on the Old Testament story of Joshua leading the Hebrews into the Promised Land. But today, to get us started, we're going to flash back a little farther. Today, we're going to exercise our 20/20 hindsight back to the final days of Moses, as told in Deuteronomy 34. We're going to see how Moses and other spiritual leaders of former times show us the 20/20 vision of a faithful past.

1—HONORING THE VISION OF THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS WHO CAME BEFORE US

Deuteronomy 34 begins by honoring the vision of the spiritual leaders who came before us. This chapter is a eulogy. It offers a great tribute to Moses, the spiritual leader whom God had sent to deliver the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and to lead them through the sea and the wilderness. Moses was a visionary, and this final chapter of his life shows him in that light—up on top of Mount Nebo, at the summit of Pisgah. Even after all he had accomplished, Moses was still looking toward God's vision of what lay ahead for God's people.

From that high point, Moses could see the city of Jericho and across the whole land that would be allocated to the 12 tribes. This forward sight wasn't something that God or Moses had just dreamed up recently, on the fly, however. No, this vision had originated in the ancient times of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—when God first promised that this land would be a home to Abraham's descendants. With this 20/20 hindsight from his faith tradition, Moses honored the visions of his predecessors and connected his current generation and future generations to how they might see that vision too.

Was Moses' visionary task easy or popular? Certainly not always! The Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Exodus tell us that very often the people complained against his leadership. They didn't always appreciate the vision God gave him. When they were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, they said they wished Moses had never taken them out of slavery in Egypt. When he went up on Mt. Sinai to meet with God and get the Ten Commandments, they complained that he was gone too long, and they created and worshiped a golden calf. You'll recall they caused Moses to get so angry that he even threw down and broke the first set of 10-commandment stone tablets and had to make a second set. Very often Moses had to bring the Hebrews more laws to rein in their temptations and to guide them to live according to God's will. Very often Moses had to intercede with God in prayer to prevent God's punishing wrath from coming down upon those sinful people.

And, so, it was good that Moses was given this final tribute. He certainly deserved it! Even though it took many more centuries before this eulogy was written down, edited, and canonized as scripture, it's good that Moses was hailed and honored as a prophet whom God knew face to face. His unequaled signs, wonders, and mighty deeds made Moses a spiritual leader who was worthy of great honor.

This tribute to Moses' faithfulness in ancient times reminds us of the importance of recalling spiritual leaders and saints in times more recent to us. Do you know the name of John Wesley? Of course you do! He was the founder of Methodism, who lived in England in the 1700s. Do you know the

name of Francis Asbury? Maybe less of you are sure about that one. Francis Asbury was the great leader of *American* Methodism in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Some of you know the name of Jedediah Strong Smith, right? We have a room in our church named after him because—20 years before the Mormon pioneers arrived in Utah—Jedediah Smith, a Bible-toting Methodist layman, was the first Caucasian man to cross the Great Basin Desert through Utah. How about Francis Willard? She was an amazing Methodist leader in the 1800s, fighting for women's rights to be delegates to general conference, to be ordained, to vote in civic elections, and to have homes and a society not degraded by alcohol.

How about G.M. Pierce? Have you ever heard of him? Rev. G.M. Pierce was a Methodist minister who traveled by train and preached Ogden's first ever Methodist worship service in the train station on June 26, 1870. It's because of the vision and faithfulness of that man of God, Rev. G.M. Pierce, that our congregation will be celebrating our 150th anniversary next June. In the following months, the fledgling congregation was served by Rev. Danley and Rev. Teall. It was under Rev. Teall's spiritual leadership that the congregation purchased its first church building and had the vision to develop a Methodist school.

Obviously, since then, there have been dozens more ministers and thousands more lay persons who have been the saintly leaders who dreamed and sacrificed to bring God's vision to reality in Methodist ministry to the people in and around Ogden. Some of you long-time members of this congregation can remember far back to faces and names of those who taught Sunday School, who sang in choirs, who performed maintenance, who planned and cooked giant Election Day Dinners, and who gave generously to fund the ministries. Some of you can see with your mind's eye those persons who envisioned and dreamed of the education wing that was built onto the old church at 26th and Jefferson, and more of you can picture those who saw and worked for the vision of this new church out here in Marriott-Slaterville. Fortunately, some of you visionaries are still alive and well and continue to be

active among us! But, for now, think back to those faithful leaders of the past. With our 20/20 hindsight, we honor them!

2—LEARNING FROM THOSE SPIRITUAL LEADERS WHO CAME BEFORE US

There's more to the Moses story in Deuteronomy 34 than just honoring faithful leaders of the past, however. Having the vision of a faithful past also means learning from those spiritual leaders who came before us. In this chapter of eulogy, we see several lessons worth learning.

First of all, Moses went up on a mountain to see his vision. It's still true today that spiritual leaders need time to get up above and away from the fray, so they can think and see God's visions. And, by *spiritual leaders*, I hope you realize that I'm not just talking about ministers. I'm talking about all of us who want to be spiritual leaders in our families, in our circle of friends, in our congregation, in our neighborhood, at work, in our community, and in the world. I really hope you see yourself in that group.

In the United Methodist Church, we talk about "the ministry of the ordained," but we also talk about "the ministry of the baptized." That means every baptized Christian has a role in living and sharing the gospel. And that means every one of us needs to set apart sacred time to commune with God face to face, like Moses did. We need to take devotional time for scripture reading and for prayer. We need to reflect on what it means. We need to take inventory of our spiritual lives and see if there's something wrong that we should stop doing, or something right that we should do more. We need to place high value on attending worship, so that our own tiny perspective is stretched by God's bigger vision of what God wants us to be doing in the congregation, community, and the world.

A **second** lesson we can see from this eulogy of Moses is that even the greatest spiritual leaders have limitations. The way Deuteronomy 34 is written is priceless. Verse seven tells us that "Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated." Since we aren't told that he was suddenly attacked by violence or run over by a stampede of sheep, we almost have to assume that Moses had some kinds of physical infirmities that wore him down. Most

people, by the time they get to be 90, 100, 110, or 120, aren't feeling all that spry anymore. Even if we say that Moses' "unimpaired vision" was a metaphor about his unfailing ability to dream God's wishes for the Hebrew people, still Moses was limited by God. At the end of verse four, God told Moses, "I have let you see [the Promised Land] with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." There was only so much even the great and powerful Moses could do.

We don't bring up this fact to diminish Moses. We bring it up to help us all be more realistic today. If our heroes of the faith are so beyond imagination, there's no hope for us ever to be like them, and we may not feel any motivation to try. But if we recognize that they were mere mortals too, then we can see an opportunity to follow in their footsteps.

This opportunity to join in the ranks of spiritual leaders is essential because a **third** lesson we see in this Deuteronomy 34 tribute to Moses is that any vision of a faithful past includes a hand-off of responsibility and authority. Just as Moses inherited his faithful vision from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so Moses then had to turn over leadership and vision to Joshua. Verse nine tells us that Joshua "was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed [Joshua], doing as the Lord had commanded Moses." Moses had to let go, and endorse and bless Joshua, so the Hebrew people could move forward. Yes, they wept and mourned for Moses, and then it was time to move on to the next phase of God's vision.

CONCLUSION

We began today's worship service singing the hymn, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come." I love that hymn which reminds us that the same God who gave vision to spiritual leaders in the past is still guiding and directing us today and into the future. May each of our lives and the ministry of this congregation be blessed by the vision of a faithful past.