

Living Wholeheartedly and Aging Creatively

Deuteronomy 31:1-3, 7-8, 14-16, 34:1-8

February 4, 2024

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

1 When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, 2 he said to them: "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, "You shall not cross over this Jordan." 3 The Lord your God will cross over before you.

7 Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that Yahweh has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. 8 It is the Holy One who goes before you. God will be with you and will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."
Deuteronomy 31:1-3, 7-8

14 The Holy One said to Moses, "Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him." So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting, 15 and the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent. 16 The Lord said to Moses, "Soon you will lie down with your ancestors..."
Deut. 31:14-16

1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. 4 Yahweh said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebecca, and to Leah and Rachel and Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over." 5 Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. 6 He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. 7 Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. 8 The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Deut. 34:1-8

One of the parts of being a pastor I treasure is to listen to people of different ages and seasons of life talk about life and death. How do we see our lives unfolding and how do we see some of the last chapters? There are dreams and hopes and there are unexpected surprises and turns of events. Sometimes there are unexpected blessings. Others are heartbreak and diagnosis and treatments. There are many factors that play into the ways we see our lives and the length of our lives and the qualities of our years. Choices we make, factors beyond our control, intentions, genetics. And what our spirituality, our faith, can shape our experiences and our deepest longings and desires.

What can we learn from Moses? He led the Hebrew people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt. He is been the leader called by God to lead the people to the Promised Land. 40 year they have wandered. He has led the people and reminded them of Yahweh's presence and covenant. A leader, a teacher, a prophet sent by the Holy One. Not perfect.

And now Moses is close to the end of his life. He thought he would enter the Promised Land with the people. No, that was not to be. So he gives his final speeches and reminds the people of all the ways Yahweh has been faithful. His role has changed.

He points beyond himself. He points to God's Self and the well-being of others long after he is gone. He is teaching to let go of the ego and its interests awakens us to the grandeur of the universe, the adventure in companionship with God. I was struck with the details included in the story about Moses. 120 years old? It a figure of speech. "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about." Truth about our bodies slow down. We can be honest, but that does not stop Moses and writers of oral tradition from showing what Moses does: writing his legacy, pointing to the presence and promises of the Holy One, a song, blessings. Prayer and drawing close to God in public and private.

Moses knows the end of his life is near. The Lord said to Moses, "Your time to die is near." We don't know when our time is. He continues living in the moment. We too are called to do that.

Moses dies. We don't know how he was feeling. There is a sense he said all he needs to say and trusts God's presence.

A key aspect of this passage is the theme of vision and sight. In verse 1, God causes Moses to see the land, and in verse 4, God tells Moses, "I have caused you to see it with your eyes." We are told that his eyesight was unimpaired (34:7). The chapter also ends by remembering the wonderful things that Moses did "in the eyes of all Israel" (34:12). Though we may need to open up our own eyes and look for what God is doing and where God is, we also may need to ask God to show us — to reveal to us — where God is at work.

"I have been to the mountaintop; I have seen the Promised Land." These words proclaimed by Martin Luther King could easily echo Moses' sentiments as he looked toward Canaan. He had shepherded an emerging nation; he brought them from no people to the verge of their new homeland, but he will be unable to set foot on the ground that inspired his dreams. We may never enjoy or see the fruits of our actions, but still we claim our ability to help shape the future. Hope enables us to trust that God will use our finite lives as contributors to an everlasting adventure.

Rethinking the process of aging and living

Marjory Zoet Bankson is a gifted writer, retreat leader and part of the Church of the Savior Seekers Church in Washington DC. She wrote a book a few years ago *Creative Aging*. She looks

at releasing a former role identity, facing inner resistance, recovering hidden gifts, forming a vision for the future, choosing generativity, and taking risks. She was in her early 70's when she wrote the book and was thinking about life around and after retirement. She invites people to reflect on their experiences and gifts they move into this generative period of life. How do we identify ourselves when we change roles? How is God calling us?

Kathleen Dowling Singh – The Grace in Aging

Learn to use your later years for awakening and spiritual growth. Encouraging, inspiring, and practical, *The Grace in Aging* invites all those who have ever experienced spiritual longing to awaken in their twilight years. Since aging, in and of itself, does not lead to spiritual maturity, Dowling Singh suggests and explores causes and conditions that we can create in our lives, just as we are living them, to allow awakening to unfold—transforming the predictable sufferings of aging into profound opportunities for growth in clarity, love, compassion, and peace.

John O-Donohue – Stillness and Ripening

Stillness is vital to the world of the soul. If as you age you become more still, you will discover that stillness can be a great companion. The fragments of your life will have time to unify, and the places where your soul-shelter is wounded or broken will have time to knit and heal. You will be able to return to yourself. In this stillness, you will engage your soul. Many people miss out on themselves completely as they journey through life. They know others, they know places, they know skills, they know their work, but tragically, they do not know themselves at all. Aging can be a lovely time of ripening when you actually meet yourself, indeed maybe for the first time. There are beautiful lines from T. S. Eliot that say:

'And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'

Facing Death

As we face the last chapters or acts in a play or whatever metaphor we find helpful as we live fully now, in the present, Moses trusts the Holy Mystery, Yahweh, Elohim, one who cannot be named. Moses knows who he has been and who he is and that he is not alone. He worships the one who was pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, manna in the wilderness, a voice on the mountaintop.

What about us? In the book many of us are reading and discussing – Wendy Farley's book *Beguiled by Beauty*, I was struck by a section in Chapter 2. She writes – "Who we understand God to be is deeply related to who we believe ourselves to be." This matters in how we see living our lives and facing death. Wendy suggests most of the time we have forgotten our true identity. We no longer remember that we are adored and cherished by God. That we are beloved by the source of love. Nothing can separate us or change that. If we live in response to that eternal love now, then we can trust that never ends. Who we understand the Beloved

to be - A Holy One that is not a score keeper or indifferent clock maker, but a source of the deepest truth and joy and love holding us. A presence. Let's remember who we are.

Anne Lamott – blessings of knowing ourselves better and blessing of peace of nature

I spend a lot of time looking out the window. Age has given me this time and intention. I didn't have so much of either when I was younger. My brain went much faster. There was so much to do, so much need and striving, and I had my trusty clipboard. Now I study the coral-colored abutilon buds right outside our window, little cups that hold the rainwater. Hummingbirds swing by all day to drink, and so it is a treat both for the eyes and for the spirit, for the bird and for the flower.

One of the blessings of age is that most of us get along with ourselves better than when we were young. It is stunning to accept yourself...

The peace of nature wears down the fear and hatred that arise in me on bad days, until I remember at some point that all we can do is the next right thing. I often remind myself of something the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said that helps me focus: "Don't let them get you to hate them." When they do, I lose me, I lose my center and my goodness, which will be needed for the hard work ahead of being older and saving democracy.

So today I notice there's an incredible reflective herringbone design in the stream of rock and shadow and rock and shadow. I breathe in the cool air. My soul settles.

Like Moses, may we tell our stories of our lives and offer our hopes to those in our circle of love, our tribes, our beloveds, our church, our world.

Aging is choosing stillness, ripening, noticing beauty, awakening to a deep spiritual longing.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, may we know the Holy One and see ourselves and remember who we are – eternally and presently beloved. Amen.

Resources

Marjory Zoet Bankson, *Creative Aging: Rethinking Retirement and Non-Retirement in a Changing World*. (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2010)

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (Transworld Ireland, 1997)

Anne Lamott, *Opinion - Age makes the miracles easier to see*, 1.17.24, *Washington Post*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/01/17/age-acceptance-love-hate/>

Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Aging: Awaken As You Grow Older*. (Wisdom Publications, 2014)