

In the New Year
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What are the disappointments in your life?

Our bible story this morning is all about disappointment. “God says to Moses: This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying: ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

What a blow to Moses, at the end of his life no less! Here, he had gotten them safely out of Egypt, tramped around in the wilderness with them for forty years putting up with all their complaining, and now “when he finally had it all but made and got them as far as the top of Pisgah, where the whole Promised Land stretched out before them as far as the eye could see, God spoke up and said this was the place all right, but Moses was not to enter it with them.” (Buechner)

You’d think he’d be devastated. After all, this was what he was born for- to lead his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. You’d think this would do him in, that he’d just curl up and die. But no! “His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.” Even this disappointment does not overcome him. Instead, he overcomes this big and final disappointment. It seems that over a life-time, 128 years to be exact!, as the story goes, Moses had learned how to cope with life’s disappointments.

And there atop Mount Pisgah, when Moses realized that his days were numbered, his vision changed. Instead of looking out, over the Promised Land, he looked back. He looked back clear eyed at his own life.

From the point of view of others, Moses’ life was a great success. After all, it was he who led his people out of slavery. It was he who split the red sea. It was he who ascended Sinai to receive the tablets of the law. If that’s not success, what is?!

Sure, Moses thinks to himself, those were amazing events to be apart of, but there was plenty of disappointment in my life. Nobody knows how hard it really was. Especially, he remembers, the greatest blow of all...

It was that day on Mount Sinai when they were finally closing the deal, or so he thought. It was so exciting. It was Moses’ dream to forge a nation of former slaves into a people who would unhesitatingly and wholeheartedly follow God’s laws; and his dream was just about to come true. They would be God’s people and God would be their God. God would always be there for them and they would have no other Gods. It was as if they were dating and this God finally proposed and they talked out what it meant, to be in covenant, and everyone agreed to it and now they were closing the deal. The documents were in hand. Signed, sealed, delivered...I’m yours.

Moses had been on the mountain for 40 days with God, learning more of the particulars of this relationship, and now he was heading back down the mountain to fill the people in. He was practically running he was so excited to show his people the commandments that were carved on the tablets. He had worked hard developing his people, helping them to shed their slave mentality, helping them to have a wider vision of the world with only one God. He knew they were ready for the unveiling of the tablets. The long awaited dream of a perfect God and a perfect people was just about to come true!

And that's when it happened. He was coming down the mountain, stone tablets in hand. He heard something and his heart sank. He knew immediately that something was amiss. It was the sound of revelry-the kind of revelry that comes from spiritual intoxication. But it wasn't time for that yet. Something else must be going on. And he got close to the camp and saw the calf, the golden calf and his people dancing around it, as if it were a God. They were worshipping an idol. The people had grown restless with Moses up at the mountain for forty days. Whether this is a bitter betrayal or garden variety human unreliability, Moses can hardly believe it's true. He is devastated as he watches them dancing around the golden calf, ignoring everything they had learned.

And how he responds! He throws the tablets to the ground in anger... or, do they slip from his hands? In Michelangelo's portrayal, in his sculpture of Moses, the tablets seem to slip from Moses' hands as his heart is overcome with the pangs of frustration and futility. It is a picture of profound disappointment.

Could it be that all of these memories come back to Moses vividly at the end of his life, when he was atop Mount Pisgah? And he thinks to himself. Really! How **did** I go on after that?

And then he smiles, remembering his resilience. He smiles thinking about the miracle of resilience that God puts into all human beings.... Amazing, he thinks....

How do you go on after a profound disappointment in your life?

After Moses breaks the tablets, what happens? A few chapters later, in the book of Exodus, we read that God says to Moses :” Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, (this time Moses cuts them) and I will write on the tablets, the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain.” God invites Moses to try again. This doesn't happen immediately. There's a lot of healing and reconciling that happens in the between time, between the first and second set of tablets. But still, there is a second chance...

The story, according to Jewish tradition, is that Moses goes back and lovingly gathers up the fragments from the foot of the mountain and places them in the ark (which is the vessel that contains and protects the sacred text): He puts the fragments alongside the new, intact replacement set. “He keeps the shattered pieces to remind himself of what

he once dreamed and to remind himself of lessons he learned when the dream shattered.” (Kushner) It was a noble dream, but it needed to bump against the moral ambiguity of the real world. As Harold Kushner writes in his book Overcoming Life’s Disappointments, the first set of tablets God gave Moses and the second set God and Moses created together. “The first set reflected the perfection of God. The second set reflected the ideal of God filtered through the limitations of human beings and the reality of human experience.” Moses learns from his disappointment. He finds a way to pick up the pieces and integrate them into his new dream. His youthful ideals are replaced by more realistic and sustainable dreams. For Moses, the shattered fragments were not millstones weighing him down with the sense of failure, but rather they become stepping-stones, forming the foundation of future success.

A poet writes about deep disappointment:
*though cruel now, it serves a deeper kindness,
wise to the larger call of growth.*

Moses’ heart did not harden through that hard experience, but it changed. It was able to hold more somehow, hold more complexity, hold more wisdom, hold more grace. And the morning he goes up to Sinai, the second time, he experiences something about God that he never quite got before, and it stayed with him for the rest of his life. It is written,

*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
the Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*

And you, beloved congregation, I know that you have disappointments, some that are huge. But I implore you to remember, in the dawning of this New Year, 2022, that you are made of the same stuff as Moses. Have every confidence that the miracle of resilience is planted in your soul. When life deals you a painful blow, let it hurt, but trust yourself to get over it. Pick up the pieces and dream new dreams. For God IS abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

There he is at the top of Mt. Pisgah, in his last days. And this one final disappointment, this final blow, huge as it is- not entering the promised land- even this does not overcome him! He has had so much experience with disappointment in his life and the well worn tracks of his spiritual path lead him now quite naturally away from bitterness, envy, self doubt and towards wisdom. He looks over the Promised Land once again, and sighs, the long sigh of the soul. “This too, this too. This is the truth of my life right now and its okay.” And with this final breath of utter acceptance, he is ready to move on, ready for the next dream.

He lifts his eyes, the clouds grow thin, and he sings. He sings as he leaves this world. “God has smiled on me...God’s been good to me.”

Sources

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