

The Start of Something New: "We Can See the Promised Land"

October 26, 2008

Year A: Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

If you follow baseball you know the World Series is going on right now. It's a nice little distraction from the election and the economy. Catching a little bit of that baseball fever reminded me of a story I heard once about the poor hapless Chicago Cubs.

The last time the Cubs were in the World Series was back in 1945. And although they've come close to winning the pennant – especially this year - it has been a long drought. There seems to be a clear reason why.

Back when Charlie Grimm was manager of the Cubs, he received a phone call from one of his scouts. "Boss," the scout said, "I've just seen a pitcher here in a small town in Nebraska who is amazing. This afternoon the kid pitched a no-hitter. And not your usual no-hitter. He threw 27 strikeouts in a row. Nobody touched the ball until the last inning when some guy hit a foul ball. I've got the pitcher right here with me. Shall I sign him up?"

"No!" said Manager Grimm. "Sign the guy who hit the foul ball. We need hitters."¹

Ah – short-sighted vision. How often have we seen our favorite sports teams fall into that trap? Today, as you guessed it our passage is about vision. In fact, the whole sermon series is about vision – about staying focused squarely on the Promised Land. Clear back when we started this series the Hebrew people had in mind the Promised Land. As you can imagine it was the goal that kept them going. When they were in slavery in Egypt, Moses told them about the Promised Land. Moses convinced them about this place of milk and honey. Moses told them that they would be free – no slavery, no inhumane conditions. Then on their journey these Hebrew people faced numerous hardships. Lack of food, lack of water, lack of getting anywhere and it was Moses that reminded them of the Promised Land. When Moses was up on that mountain for 40 days getting those rules from God, it was Moses that told them that the Promised Land was close. The Promised Land was the vision and Moses was the man who was going to get them there. For 40 years these Hebrew people have been waiting for this moment. Moses, their leader through thick and thin, through plenty and want, through hardship and joy, has brought them to the precipice of this moment. Today Moses is just about ready to let them enter for they can see the Promised Land. Just listen to this passage.

[Deut. 34:1-12 \(NRSV\)](#)

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:

¹ Dr. Dan L. Flanagan. "As Far As The Eye Can See." (Norfolk, Nebraska: Norfolk United Methodist Parish. October 27, 1996.)

Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain -- that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, "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." ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD'S command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.

⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

He dies – Moses dies! The greatest prophet in all of Israel – dies – just short of the Promised Land. You know I don't think we really grasp the significance of this passage for the Hebrew people. One commentator describes Moses as the greatest prophet in all of Israel. Not only that he held every office for this new nation. He was prophet, priest, ruler, judge, and interpreter of God. All of these offices in just one person. We may have a hard time getting our head around this concept because in our country we separate out each office. For example, if our pastor dies, we still have our President. If our judge dies we still have someone who will interpret God for us. But for the early Israelites this is all in Moses. And not only that but the very vision of the Promised Land is Moses. We can't get to the Promised Land without Moses? How do we focus on where we need to go if the very object of our vision is now gone?

It reminded me of when I was in seminary in Kansas City. We had a prominent Korean professor on staff and many Korean students came to the seminary. One Wednesday in chapel they led the service showing us what a typical Korean Christian service would be like and I noticed something – everything was focused on the unity of North and South Korea. The liturgy, the prayers, even the sermon, was all focused on this one vision. And I thought that is great but if this is typical of a Korean service what happens when there is true unification? What becomes the meaning of faith when you achieve your vision? What happens to the church when all your focus is on one goal and it's achieved?

I once served a church where our primary focus was paying off the building debt. We had a sizable note when I got there and every Administrative Council meeting we talked about how much was left and how much interest we

had to pay. This church held three fund-raisers throughout the year and everyone knew that they were not giving for a meal but were raising money for the building debt. Well, I was fortunate enough to be part of the church's dedication where we paid off that building. We celebrated an achievement that took that church 15 years to accomplish. And do you know what happened next? We struggled to find a new vision. You see we were so focused on just getting the building paid off that we got it done we didn't know where to turn next.

Today, literally we are at the end of the journey with the Hebrew people. We can see the Promised Land but now we are at a crisis point. Our vision is so intertwined with Moses that with his death our focus is stuck? Has this ever happened to us? Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Church* says this happens to churches with itinerant pastors all the time.

He writes: "A long pastorate does not *guarantee* a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years *guarantees* a church *won't* grow.

"Can you imagine what the kids would be like in a family where they got a new daddy every two or three years? They would most likely have serious emotional problems. In the same way, the longevity of the leadership is a critical factor for the health and growth of a church family. Long pastorates make deep, trusting, and caring relationships possible. Without those kinds of relationships, a pastor won't accomplish much of lasting value."²

I agree with Rick Warren do accomplish that, however, many of us have seen the reverse to also be true. I've told you about Ken Hicks, a retired Bishop in our church. We had once served the same church both early in our careers. Before he became a Bishop he was the senior pastor of Grand Island Trinity United Methodist Church, one of the largest churches in our Conference. He had just replaced a man who had served that church for some 25 years. Ken was an accomplished pastor – obviously he became Bishop – and has most pastors do he put his stamp on the worship service. Now Grand Island Trinity grew quite large during his predecessors years. In those 25 years that church always sang for their opening hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. And worship always ended with *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Well, as you can imagine a new pastor chose some different hymns and a giant outcry could be heard throughout Hall County. The vision of the church was wrapped up in one man so much so that the church was not able to move forward.

This is the Israelites problem. The vision was so intertwined with Moses that if they didn't capture the vision themselves they were going to languish right there in sight of the Promise Land.

This sermon series is all about the start of something new and I know that many of you have done it. You've made a commitment to read the Bible more during this time. You've decided to try our evening classes on Monday or Wednesday night. You've dedicated yourself to improving a relationship with a loved one, a neighbor, a friend. You have decided to try something new just to see if it would work out. And this journey of yours has often mirrored the Israelites. It got tough. You wanted to turn back to your old ways. You

² Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 1995.) 31.

complained. You didn't like what was happening. But you were seeing some results and so you kept going. Not only that you hung on to the hope that the Promised Land was just around the corner. You hung onto the vision that the end was almost in sight. You can see the Promised Land but something's holding us back.

At the time that Leonardo da Vinci painted "The Last Supper," he had an enemy who was a fellow painter. Da Vinci had had a bitter argument with this man and despised him. When da Vinci painted the face of Judas Iscariot at the table with Jesus, he used the face of his enemy so that it would be present for ages as the man who betrayed Jesus. He took delight while painting this picture in knowing that others would actually notice the face of his enemy on Judas.

As he worked on the faces of the other disciples, he often tried to paint the face of Jesus, but couldn't make any progress. Da Vinci felt frustrated and confused. In time he realized what was wrong. His hatred for the other painter was holding him back from finishing the face of Jesus. Only after making peace with his fellow painter and repainting the face of Judas was he able to paint the face of Jesus and complete his masterpiece.³

What in your life is holding you back from capturing that vision? You can see the Promised Land, but you're stuck right here? What's holding us back? Fear! Maybe a past we don't want to let go of. Maybe we don't want to change. Or we're tired. Or maybe its just we're comfortable. We like the way things are. Even though we can see the Promised Land, even though we can see how stepping up to the next level will make things better for ourselves, for those around us, for everyone else, we won't or we can't because the Promised Land is someone else's vision. We didn't ask to come on this journey. We didn't need anything new in our life. Things were just fine without this Moses character. But what does Moses see? "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 . . ." Moses sees the vision. Moses sees the future of Israel. He has led his people to the very edge of the Promised Land. He has led his people to the land of something new. Their wilderness journey has ended and they now have the choice to move forward into this land that was given to them or they could remain right there and have their vision die with Moses on that spot. We can see the Promised Land. What's our choice?

William & Mary College owes its existence to a president named Ewell. During the Civil War and the hard days of reconstruction that followed, William & Mary went bankrupt. Soon, it had a deserted campus, decaying building and no students. It was written off as dead by everyone, except President Ewell. Ewell continued to climb the bell tower each morning, calling the school to class. He acted as if the school was still there. People thought him crazy. But for seven years, every day, President Ewell rang the bells, maintaining his vision. Eventually, others caught his vision. Students, teachers, and money returned.

³ Wayne Rice. *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1993.) 161.

The second oldest American university survived, thanks to President Ewell's vision.⁴

You know when we started this sermon series we decided to take a chance with God. Try something new, see where God leads us. As we've walked with the Israelites we found out something about God. God is really really patient with us. We've done our fair share of complaining. We have been tempted by old habits. We have been reluctant to follow God's rules. But in almost every instance God has been in our corner, God has been on our side and here we are just short of our goal and by golly we are not going to let the vision die here in the wilderness. Our choice our clear – we can pick up the mantle of Moses and get behind Joshua and remember that the vision is not Moses', the vision is not just God's, the vision – is our vision. The promise – is our promise. The hope – is our hope. And the vision does not stop just because of a set-back. We can see the Promised Land and the choice is now up to us.

There's a story about a couple of boys that were up to no good. They had heard about an old wise man that lived up in the mountains that most people went to for advice. One night they decided to play a trick on the old man. These boys captured a bird and went to see the wise man. When they got to his door the old man came out and greeted them. The boys said, "we've heard that you are a wise man and that your wisdom is greater than any one else's around."

The old man just nodded his head.

The boys then said, "if you are so wise could you tell us if this bird that we have in our hands is alive or dead?"

The old man knew this was a trap. He said to them, "if I tell you that the bird is alive you will crush it and tell everyone I'm a liar. However, if I tell you that the bird is dead, then you will open your hands and allow that bird to fly away. I just can't win." So the man paused. And then answered their question this: "Boys, you hold in your hands the choice of life or death. I can not make that decision for you. You must choose yourself." And with that the wise old man walked back into his house.

Folks, we have a choice today. We can decide to let the vision die right here short of the Promised Land or we can pick up the mantle, step up in our faith, and truly establish something new in our relationship with God and walk right into the Promised Land. The decision is yours for we can see the Promised Land. Amen.

⁴ Flanagan.