

**THE VISION SUMMIT –
STAGE 1. CHOOSING THE PEAK**

Deuteronomy 34:1-9

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SCRIPTURE

Then Moses went up to Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab and climbed Pisgah Peak, which is across from Jericho. And the LORD showed him the whole land, from Gilead as far as Dan; ²all the land of Naphtali; the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; all the land of Judah, extending to the Mediterranean Sea; ³the Negev; the Jordan Valley with Jericho—the city of palms—as far as Zoar. ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have now allowed you to see it with your own eyes, but you will not enter the land.” ⁵So Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, just as the LORD had said. ⁶The LORD buried him in a valley near Beth-peor in Moab, but to this day no one knows the exact place. ⁷Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyesight was clear, and he was as strong as ever. ⁸The people of Israel mourned for Moses on the plains of Moab for thirty days, until the customary period of mourning was over. ⁹Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him, doing just as the LORD had commanded Moses (Deuteronomy 34:1-9 NLT).

THE PREMISE

Over 3,000 years ago the great spiritual leader Moses was on a journey with God’s people to find the Promised Land.¹ After a long trek they reached the mountains east of the Jordan River and near the north end of the Dead Sea. Moses then decided to climb to the top of one of these mountains. It was called Mount Nebo (but also known as Pisgah Peak).² The question before us is this: Why did Moses climb to the top of Mount Nebo? It may not seem like it but this is an important question. If we are able to successfully answer this question then such an answer may dramatically transform the life of this

¹ We do not have a precise date for when Moses lived. Most commentators place him in a period in Egypt called the New Kingdom (1550-1069 B.C.) with many placing Moses’ birth at around 1526 B.C.

² It is also possible Nebo refers to the range and Pisgah is a specific mountain in the range.

congregation and the lives of everyone in this room.

Meanwhile, hold the question in your mind as we shall return to it shortly.

INTRODUCTION

Mount Everest is earth's highest mountain above sea level. Nepalese mountaineer Tenzing Norgay and New Zealander mountaineer Edmund Hillary were the first confirmed climbers to reach the summit. After the experience, Hillary was quoted as saying:

There is something about building up a comradeship – that I still believe is the greatest of all feats – and sharing in the dangers with your company of peers. It's the intense effort, the giving of everything you've got. It's really a very pleasant sensation.

Modern mountain climbing is a group effort. The climbers are part of a larger team that includes sponsors, suppliers, outfitters, support staff, and so on – most of whom do not make the actual climb but nonetheless are essential for and benefit from a successful climb. There is a plethora of metaphors here that can be used to describe the life and mission of the church. You may be the spiritual equivalent of a climber or a sponsor or an outfitter or support staff but what is needed is that we work together as a team in order to have a successful expedition as the people of God.

Mountain climbing is carried out in stages. The first stage is the choosing of the peak. Attempting to climb a mountain without actually having a mountain to climb would be a silly state of affairs. So how do mountaineers choose the peak they wish to climb?

Famous mountain climber George Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest. He reportedly answered, "Because it's there." On a certain level this is a profound response but on any level it is not a particularly helpful one. I suppose many climbers choose a peak based on a personal desire to meet a challenge and a general assessment of their own abilities.

1. ARE WE BEING FAITHFUL?

Why did Moses choose Mount Nebo? If you look at the end of verse 1 in our Scripture text it infers that Moses went up Mount Nebo because the Lord had directed him to do so. Moses was there because he wanted to do what the Lord wanted him to do.

There is no higher justification in life than this. Whether we are talking about an individual believer or a congregation of believers, our ultimate goal is to live a life that

pleases God, a life that is faithful to God. God is looking for faithfulness, not selfish or materialistic gain.

The story is told of Mansa Musa the wealthy gold miner.³ He died and stood before St. Peter who asked him, “By what claim do you seek to enter heaven?” Musa indignantly replied, “I am the greatest in history. While on earth I amassed nearly 400 billion dollars worth of gold. What do you call that?” Peter looked at him and said, “Here we call that pavement.”⁴

What does it mean to be faithful? The Bible expresses it in so many wonderful ways. I like how it is explained in the Book of Proverbs:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take (Prov 3:5-6 NLT).

2. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Why did Moses climb Mount Nebo? He did so because he wanted to be faithful. But there was more to it than that. Moses also wanted to know where they were going.

Many years ago my wife and I were hiking in the Uinta Mountains of Utah. We got lost. And because we were lost we had an overwhelming urge to try to get down from the mountain as quickly as possible. But that would have been foolish. Without knowing where we were we could easily have walked into something even more dangerous. So we fought the urge to descend. It was counterintuitive, but instead of going down we went up. We continued up until we reached the peak. And it was only then that we could see clearly where we needed to go.

It seems to me that Moses was in a similar situation when he was on a journey with God’s people to find the Promised Land. To be fair, the Scripture text does not say he was lost. But when someone has already taken 40 years to make an 11 day trip, and still hasn’t arrived, what would *you* call it?

At the very least Moses was tired and perhaps not a little discouraged. He had been at this a long time. He was also mindful that hundreds of years earlier God had made a

³ Mansa Musa was the ruler of the Malian Empire from A.D. 1280-1337 and reportedly accumulated a fortune from the gold and salt trade worth the modern equivalent of \$400 billion.

⁴ Revelation 21:21.

promise to his ancestors Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would become a great nation and inhabit the land of Canaan and be the means by which God would reveal a blessed salvation for all the peoples of the world. That was the promise. But Moses may have wondered, after traveling for so long, if the promise was really true.

But on Mount Nebo he looked west and God showed him the Promised Land. He may not have literally seen all the Promised Land but what he did see was enough to convince him that the promise was real. This was a land described as “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:17). In other words, it was a land that was rich, lush, beautiful, and providing an abundance of enjoyment. If Moses had been discouraged while climbing the mountain all that was gone once he reached the summit.

It is easy in life to get discouraged even if, and sometimes especially if, we believe in God. At such times it is important that we stop and seek a higher vantage, a summit view if you will – to look around and see what God has done and is doing in our midst, to delight in the very real promises of God, to marvel at the vastness of God’s love for us. If God did not withhold even his own dear Son from us, can we not trust such a God to bring us to the ultimate Land of Promise, far beyond a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, a world made new where God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain” and, yes, the streets will be paved with gold? (Rev 21:4, 21 NLT).

The climb to the mountain top gave encouragement to Moses and assured him that his people had a God-promised destination. But the summit of Mount Nebo also afforded a practical answer as to what would be the next step in the journey. It was clear from this vantage point that the best way to cross into the Land of Canaan was to cross the river near Jericho. And we know from history that is what they did.

A major reason for our Vision Summit Series is to facilitate a “climb” to the summit for renewed hope in the journey of faith and a clear vision of God’s preferred future for our fellowship. The congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek is but one small part of a vast universal body of God’s people who share a common and unshakable hope in the promises of God as revealed and vindicated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But like Moses, we also want to gain a practical answer to the question, “Where are we going?” Specifically, what steps is God leading us to take as we engage in ministry in the days and years ahead?

3. WHO WILL LEAD THE JOURNEY?

Moses never made it to the Promised Land, at least not the specific parcel of land called by that name west of the Jordan River. He died east of the river and was buried in an

unknown location. The phrase, “his eyesight was clear, and he was as strong as ever,” was a figure speech in reference to someone of great age. Today we would say, “He was in pretty good shape, for the shape he was in.”⁵

Without fanfare and with dignified simplicity, the author describes the passing of Moses, the servant of the Lord, and one of the greatest figures in all of human history. He led the people of God right up to the Promised Land. This begs the question, “Who will lead the people now that Moses is gone?” Moses had anticipated that. He passed the torch to Joshua and the next generation. Joshua would continue the journey of faith.

I don’t know if you have figured this out yet or not but what I am suggesting is that most of the people in this room are Moses. We have been laboring on this thing called church for a long time. Maybe we’re tired. Maybe we’re frustrated. Maybe we’re struggling with doubts. What we need is to renew our hope in God. We need to discern where we are going, where God wants us to go. And we need to learn how to pass the torch to the Joshua generation or, as one of our church elders puts it, “Generation J.”

How do we do that? How do we pass the torch? I must confess, I’m struggling to find the answer. But there are two ways I’m sure will not work. It will not work if we just whine about it. Complaining about the younger generation is not going to cause a stampede of Millennials to flock to church.

The second thing that will not work is to expect the next generation to be exactly like us – to do things the way we did them, to adore things we adored, to follow the same ineffective strategies we followed.

Fifteen years ago I told you that if you ask any church member, “How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?” the most likely answer you’ll get is, “Change?!”

Presbyterian Christians are afraid of change. (For that matter, a great many other Christians are as well.) Among other things, we fear the loss of tradition. But there is a huge difference between tradition and traditionalism. A Christian tradition is valuable

⁵ “And you’ll know
once your necktie’s
back under your chin
and Norval has waved you
Godspeed with his fin,
you’re in pretty good shape
for the shape you are in!” – from *You’re Only Old Once* by Dr. Seuss, 1986.

because it reflects the truth and beauty of God. Traditionalism means we do things because, well, that's the way we've always done it.

One of my favorite stories has to do with cooking a ham for Easter. It was Easter and four generations had gathered for a family dinner. The youngest girl saw her mother slice off two inches from the end of the ham and then place it in the oven. She asked, "Mom, why did you slice off the end of the ham before putting it in the oven?" Her mother replied, "I never really thought about it before. I guess it is because my mother always did it." The little girl went to her grandmother and asked, "Grandma, how come you always used to slice off the end of the ham for Easter dinner?" The grandmother replied, "Because my mother always did it that way." The little girl went to her great-grandmother and asked, "Great Grandma, how come you always used to slice off the end of the ham for Easter dinner?" "Oh, dear, " replied the great-grandmother, "that's because my pan was too small."

Joshua was not Moses. His style, approach, thinking and mannerisms were all different. But he was committed to the same God. What is more, Moses was willing to trust Joshua and so passed him the torch. Are we willing to do the same?

CONCLUSION

Why did Moses climb to the top of Mount Nebo? Do we have the answer? Not a complete one, not yet. We need to work together to find the answer. This series is a starting point.

Meanwhile, we want to recognize that God is already at work in our midst. We want to try to discern what are our next steps in our ministry here in Battle Creek. We want to learn how to pass the torch to the next generation. Above all, we want to declare with the conviction of the saints of old – God is not done with us yet!