

## “Ending to Begin”

May 22, 2022

(Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

Today’s scripture reading encompasses a lot of endings. Not only is it the end of Moses’ life, but it’s also the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the “second law”, the end of the five books comprising the Jewish law, which are known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. It’s the end of Israel’s founding events: exodus, wandering, and promise. And the end of the writings commonly attributed to Moses.

And yet, even as this passage marks so many conclusions, so too does it usher forth a time of new beginnings. For, before his death, Moses laid hands on Joshua, signaling a change not only in leadership, but in purpose. A new phase in Israel’s history, which leads right into the first chapters of the book of Joshua, where Joshua is commissioned and the people enter into the land long promised to them by God and recently previewed by Moses.

In the narrative that follows, the people will move out of formation mode and into fulfillment, out of preparation and into the struggle toward obedience. So, this 34th chapter of Deuteronomy is pivotal: It is both an end and a beginning.

But is that really so unique? To have an ending and a beginning correspond so closely? Perhaps it’s not. In the case of a death, there is the before—or the during—time, and there is the after time. The after time is new. As are our identities in the after time. We knew who we were *with* that departed person, but who and how are we without their voice, presence, or influence? That must be negotiated and lived into...*over time*. Which requires both patience and grace.

The opposite is also true: Beginnings, no matter how joyful, mark both a start and a finish. For example, even as a baby is joyously welcomed into the world at birth, their parents must also say goodbye to their lives as a well-rested couple in order to segue into life that suddenly revolves around this tiny, whaling creature.

And, much later, when that child experiences the new beginning of heading off to college or moving away, their parents will be left with an empty nest to mourn and eventually embrace as a new beginning for themselves and their matured relationship.

The reality is our lives are filled with losses we somehow manage to negotiate and live into. When I was preparing to graduate from seminary two years ago, I experienced an overwhelming anticipatory grief over leaving behind the group of friends that I bonded and deeply connected with in ways that I hadn't always experienced in my other friendships. I felt like my most authentic self when I was around these people, and I grieved over the miles that would soon come between us as the seven of us prepared to scatter across the country and figure out how to do ministry apart from each other.

I couldn't understand why grief was the only emotion I was feeling when graduation meant that I would never have to spend another sleepless night writing a Greek exegesis paper. I was about to live into the vocation to which I believed God had called me. I had a job lined up as a Pastoral Resident, I was leaving the south and moving to New York. My then boyfriend, now fiance, was moving to New York with me, and we were finally going to live in the same city after two years of long distance dating.

With all the exciting things that were happening in my life, how could my emotions possibly add up to grief? Surely this was a time for celebration, not mourning! But for me it was both. It was a time to rejoice... *and* a time to grieve.

I think part of the confusion arises out of the fact that there are many situations we don't openly understand or acknowledge as losses or occasions to grieve. There are some losses we forget to grieve at all: the loss of a dream, the loss of our childhood, the loss of a friendship, the loss of a skill that once was ours, the loss of health, the loss of healthy parents—still alive, but just not the same, the loss of a vocation, the loss of an ideology. We think we should just be able to move right along.

And, even if we do try to stop and acknowledge our grief, our society isn't necessarily structured in a way that permits us adequate time and space to properly mourn.

You may have noticed that, after Moses' death, the Israelites took a full 30 days to grieve. Customarily, this was a time of silence: A time where there were no distractions, nothing to do or say, but to face one's sense of loss head-on. Today some Jewish people will formally mourn by sitting Shiva for 7 days. But many Reformed and other Jews will only take 3 and sometimes just 1 day. I believe most workplaces will designate a week or so of paid leave for a death in the immediate family, but when it comes to extended family members, that is reduced to 2 days. It seems we must be as efficient in our grieving as we are in our working.

The other issue is that, perhaps as a result of the Puritan roots in this country and in our denomination in particular, emotion has been largely relegated to private times and spaces. Whereas lamenting and wailing are Jewish ritual traditions, we tend to limit our public grieving to funerals and memorial services and then we try to get on with it...or at least try to *appear* to be getting on with it.

I would like to think that church is one of the best, most appropriate places for us to bring our whole selves, joys and sorrows alike. Where we can be open about where we're at and be embraced wherever we are on life's journey and on the spectrum of human emotion. I would like to think it is a place where comfort and support, and, in due time, healing occur.

I do not need to have been at LAC a while to know that the faces I see in front of me have experienced a lot of loss over the past few years. That some people are still reeling from these losses. That some of these occasions have been better marked than others.

The good news is that it's not too late. The most important thing to know about grief is that it cannot be relegated to a single timetable or progression of steps. Styles and durations of grief are as individual as we are.

However, when we don't acknowledge the presence of loss and grief, we risk prolonging and complicating it in ways that can be unintentionally damaging to ourselves as individuals and as a community.

The best thing we can do for each other is exercise grace and patience. For even after we believe we have done the bulk of our work around any or all of the losses we carry, a sense of grief can be rekindled by an anniversary or another milestone. The fact is, like it or not, we live with some manner and degree of grief and loss day in and day out.

May we not live such hurried lives that we rush forward to grasp the new beginning without pausing to let go of what is ending. May we embrace life in its fullness—the joy and the grief. May we grieve well, celebrate vibrantly, and worship fully. May we learn how to tell our stories and how to help each other embrace our losses and bolster the longevity of our memories. May we resurrect old stories that renew our hope and make new life possible.

Thirty days of formal mourning prepared Joshua and the people of Israel to release their remarkable leader of 40 years. To enter a new home and embrace renewed life and dreams in the Promised Land of Canaan, where, of course, new challenges would also await them. But the loads they carried were a little lighter. For they'd gotten a head start on their grieving process. And they were able to move forward across the Jordan with God's unique vision for them as a people intact. Amen.