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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, October 29, 2023

Proper 25, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Deuteronomy 34:1-12](#)

[Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17](#)

[1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](#)

[Matthew 22:34-46](#)

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In our family's current ages and stages when we're in the car right now we spend a lot of time listening to the soundtrack of *Frozen 2*. It's our kids' current favorite movie and we also watch it with some frequency. There's a scene near the end where Princess Anna is stuck in a dark cave; her sister Princess Elsa has frozen into a block of ice; their beloved magic snowman Olaf has dissipated into a pile of snow; and all seems to be lost. And after a time of sitting, defeated, in the dark, Anna gets up, begins making her way to the almost impossibly distant way out far above, and sings a song called "The Next Right Thing."

There are times when a solution or a happy ending seems almost impossible to imagine; when things just aren't going to be fixed; and maybe the most you can do is find one thing, just one next thing to do; and do it. And then leave what comes after, to after.

Kristen Bell, the actress who plays Princess Anna, talked about how the song reflects her experience of living with depression and working to narrow her focus; not to try to solve everything, but to find the energy to do just one next thing: get out of bed; brush her teeth; eat breakfast.¹ Just the next right thing.

A couple of nights ago my wife Julia and I were talking about our sense of discouragement with so many things happening in the world right now. The devastating, brutal terrorist murders committed by Hamas in Israel, which are being followed by devastating bombardments in Gaza, the destruction of Palestinian villages in the West Bank, with no clear pathway either to justice or to peace and with more people dying and suffering day by day. Another mass gun murder in this country, a country enduring a level of gun violence unthinkable in any other wealthy nation on earth, with no clear pathway to any significant change. A political system seemingly frozen in dysfunction, with no clear pathway to addressing serious generational issues like climate change. There are not a lot of obvious solutions to these issues, at least not ones that seem attainable in reality. And it can feel overwhelming.

Moses was an old man when the people of Israel had almost reached the Promised Land. He had led them for over forty years, through the terrifying and exhilarating escape from Egypt, through the fearsome and transcendent encounter with the living God at Mount Sinai, and through endless desert wanderings. He had done what God told him and worked to keep the people fed and watered and at least somewhat contented. He had mediated endless disputes, faced challenges to his leadership, listened to endless complaints. He had put in the work.

¹ Brian Truitt, “‘Frozen 2’: Why Kristen Bell's daughters are totally on a Kristoff and Sven kick,” *USA Today* (Nov. 19, 2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/parenting/2019/11/19/frozen-2-kristen-bell-daughters/4234044002/>.

And today we heard in our first reading about Moses' glimpse of the Promised Land. God takes him up, at the very end of his life, to a mountain in Jordan, across the river from the Promised Land, and shows him the vista: from Gilead in the north to the Negev desert in the south; that small and beautiful land that is still so precious and so fought over to so many to this day, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all of whom look to Moses as a forebear in faith.

It's a climactic moment for Moses. But Moses knows, because God has long told him, that he himself will not reach the Promised Land. Here at the doorstep, it's time for Moses to hand over the torch of leadership, to hand on the work to his successor Joshua, who will actually lead the people over the Jordan.

It turns out that even the great Moses is not destined to complete the job he started. The greatest leader God has ever brought forth for the chosen people is still in the end only a contributor, not the completer. He has his part to play and it has been a big one. But he is not God. Moses too is mortal. And he comes to the end of his life without everything neatly wrapped up and tied off. His part is not to run triumphantly through the ribbon at the finish line but to hand over the baton to another. God called him not to finish the job but to be faithful in his part of it.

And I think of each one of us: all of us in the different tasks God has called us to do. Most of us will never be in a position like Moses. Yet each of us has some influence over our own sphere; our work; our friendships; our position as members of civic society. We are called not to fix everything but to be faithful where God has placed us; to do the next right thing.

We could have no better guidance for how to do that than Jesus gives us today in his summary of the Law through two great commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Who is the neighbor who is in front of me today? How can I love them as myself? Is it through a cup of cold water, an act of genuine listening, a word of loving admonition, an hour spent in quiet prayer? Is it through the vote I can cast, the dollars I can contribute, the time I can offer to a cause? What are the gifts, skills, opportunities God has given to me, and how can I use them to make God’s world a better place?

There’s a story of the Hasidic Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol who said, “When I get to heaven, God won’t ask me, ‘Zusya, why weren’t you Moses?’ God will ask me, ‘Zusya, why weren’t you Zusya?’” Zusya’s call wasn’t to be Moses but to be fully, completely himself in the circumstances God placed him in. As is your call; as is mine.

In a world that feels stuck, we still have the ability to make choices. In my own life, in my own sphere, will I let cynicism or despair keep me from being the person God has created me to be? Or will I do the next right thing; love God and love neighbor; and rest in the certainty that saving the world is God’s job, not mine, and yet God has given me a little piece of that mission; not because God can’t do it without me, but because God wants to do it through me?