

Leaving the next chapter to whom

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Unrealized expectations and dreams. There is Moses, on Mount Nebo, shown the Promised Land by God, but he is told that he will not enter it. Let us sit with that for a moment.

Moses, who confronted Pharaoh, announced the plagues, brought the people out of Egypt, led them through the sea and desert and suffered their serial ingratitude, who brought the word of God to the people, and prayed for the people to God.¹

That biblical hero is to die before the 40 year wilderness dream is realized, all because of an incident in the book of Numbers when he neglected to show God's holiness before the people at the waters of Meribah.² Rabbis have argued for centuries over what exactly Moses did wrong when Israelites were thirsty, and he tapped the rock, and water gushed from the rock. It is yet another one of those Bible mysteries to sit with.

Remember, these are stories, not historical fact. We see ourselves, our eccentricities, our failures, our redemption, our doubts, as well as our moments of wonder, mirrored in the biblical Story. Can you and I see something of Moses' bittersweet experience on Mount Nebo in our modern lives?

I recall the cover story many years ago, an interview with theologian and sociologist Diana Butler-Bass, about the disappointment of the Baby Boomer generation, that their grandchildren do not go to church, that their children do not want to baptize their grandchildren. Butler Bass offers this interesting insight:

When adult children don't baptize their own children, and there's that break in the line of family faith, grandparents feel like it's their fault. I always say, "It's not your fault. The world you grew up in has changed very radically. You didn't change it. It changed around you. And your children responded to that change in ways that don't make sense to you."³

"There needs to be a lot of trust on the part of grandparents." She said, "I tell them to let people go on the journeys they need to go on."

She is, like we are, realistic about the future of Christianity. We see it here, we see it almost everywhere. Our future is not a spectacular boost in attendance. That was her rational, scholarly, vision. But her heart, her intuition, tells her that we are part of an intriguing spiritual awakening.

If we think good works are going to save us, Butler-Bass warns us, they won't. They are important, doing social justice. But people outside our church buildings *crave*

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. <https://www.rabbisacks.org/>

² See the book of Numbers chapter 20 verses 1-13.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=numbers+20%3A+1-13&version=NRSVUE>

³ "Diana Butler Bass on why mainline churches have disappointed people" Pieta Woolley, November 1, 2013. *The United Church Observer*. Found at <https://broadview.org/church-fails-to-answer-questions/> Page 1 "Leaving the next chapter to... whom?" based on Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Oct 29, 2023

meaningful relationships – with one another, and with the Creator. When church figures out how to do that, there is our awakening.

It is painful to dream of something, to work towards it, but resign oneself that we will never see that dream realized. I know that pain. I think you do too: a relationship that breaks down after years of working at it; a project that you invest your heart and soul into, but you resolve that it will never come to fruition in your time.

I had that experience of disappointment in a church setting. I shared a great desire for transformation in that community, but there seems always at least a small pocket of resistance to change. I came to realize that I was the lightning rod for that opposition, and that my presence was preventing that dream from being realized. In two different churches this happened, where, after my saying farewell to the community of faith, they mysteriously embraced the transformation. I'm so proud of both church communities.

I realize that transformation, awakening, is not a rational thing. It is a heartfelt thing that cannot be contrived. It sometimes makes no sense. Moses, the heroic, suffering servant leader of Israel, had to stay back and die on the verge of the dream.

Wasn't it uncanny how the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made his "I have been to the mountaintop" speech in Memphis, the night before he was assassinated:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now,"⁴ said Dr. King. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people will get to the promised land.

May it be so for us, today, my friends here at St. Andrew's United Church. May we have faith that God is up to something among us even today. Amen.

⁴ A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. Ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 286. The speech was made on April 3, 1968, the speech can be found at <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>