Sermon
October 25, 2026

Chris Micklewright
rector@old-swedes.org

Sermon – Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 25A)

Scripture Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We are called to recognize that we aren't the center of God's story, that it began before us and will go on after us; our task is to be faithful with our portion of the story through loving God and neighbor.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Why didn't Moses get to enter the promised land?
    a. Bible Trivia
        i. Growing up in Evangelical churches, there were many things I eventually had to deconstruct and unlearn (patriarchy, Christian nationalism, homophobia…)
        ii. But, I do remain grateful for growing up with a knowledge of Scripture, for the significant amount of memorization I did. It often serves as a means of finding peace or listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
        iii. It also means that I'm pretty good at Bible trivia!
    b. The death of Moses
        i. Today's passage is a great source of Biblical trivia, as we see the end of the life of Moses (one of the most significant OT characters).
        ii. How old was Moses when he died? Where did he die? Who buried him? (120; Mt. Nebo, in what is now Jordan; God, apparently).
    c. But there is also a question that is more complicated than I originally realized: Why was Moses not allowed to enter the Promised Land?
        i. This is a significant restriction! Moses led the people out of Egypt, through the desert, and now is in sight of their destination. This land has ancestral significance, having been given to Abraham's family, and God had promised to bring the people back to it. As we've been talking about for weeks, these stories aren't just about freedom from EgyptC but also about freedom to be a living people in a land of their own. So, it's a big deal that Moses doesn't get to go into the land!
        ii. If you asked me a month ago, I would have said that it was because Moses offended God by striking a rock to bring forth water for the people in the desert, rather than speaking to it as God had instructed (see Numbers, chapter 20).
        iii. But, it turns out that the story is more complicated than that. To start, God had previously had Moses bring forth water from a rock precisely by striking it – as we saw in Exodus 17, back at the end of September; why was it such a problem now? But, even more interestingly, there are actually 3 different reasons given in Numbers and Deuteronomy: that Moses offended God, that the people offended God and Moses is suffering on their account, and that Moses is just too old.
        iv. A rabbi I came across this past week suggests that the authors of these texts knew that Moses did not enter the Promised Land, were fascinated with that strange fact,

and were trying to find ways of explaining it. This is born out as you start to look at Torah commentary across the past thousand years; a host of famous rabbis give numerous different explanations for what Moses did wrong and why he didn't get to enter the Promised Land.

2. Teach them how to say goodbye…
    a. The problem with explaining what Moses (or the people) did wrong…
        i. If we say that Moses not entering the Promised Land is a punishment, we risk making God into a demanding and vengeful task master.
        ii. With a god like this, we have to be ever on our guard, making sure we don't trip up and fall out of favor. We must earn our place, prove ourselves worthy of God's love and blessing.
    b. But that isn't the God who these stories have been revealing!
        i. That kind of God is indistinguishable from the gods and kings of Egypt. That kind of life and faith is defined by the logic of empire.
        ii. As we've seen again and again, the God of Moses seeks to deliver us from the logic of empire, which only ever leads to death in the end.
        iii. The God of Moses is the God of Abraham – a God who uses broken and messy people, who blesses us not because we deserve it, but because God loves us and wants us to be a blessing to others, reflecting the God who is infinitely gracious and generous.
        iv. So, that simple, Bible trivia view of Moses' death doesn't work!
    c. A different take on Moses' death
        i. I like the simple explanation: Moses was 120 years old! Maybe it wasn't a matter of punishment or worthiness at all, but just a natural end to a natural life span?
        ii. Still, I think there might also be more going on with God allowing Moses' story to end on Mt. Nebo rather than in the Promised Land. I've been thinking about a related story – the end of George Washington's presidency.
        iii. The musical *Hamilton* tells the story beautiful in the song "One Last Time." Rather than holding on to power and continuing to serve as many expect and desire, Washington retires. He tells Hamilton that doing so will allow the new American nation to "learn how to move on…[so] it outlives me when I'm gone…".
        iv. I wonder if this is what is going on with Moses. Rather than holding on to his position of power and leadership, he pushes the people to rely on God and each other, to build an identity and faith that doesn't depend on him forever.
3. We aren't the center of the story
    a. So, perhaps Moses' death reminds us that God's story began long before us, and it is likely to keep going long after us. We aren't the center of the story (as much as we sometimes try to be!).
    b. There is freedom in not having to be the savior or the main character.
        i. We don't have to achieve or produce or earn to be worthy of God's love.
        ii. We don't have to always be looking for the next opportunity or side hustle; rather, we can be present to each moment of the lives before us.
    c. Jesus reminds us in our gospel of the greatest Commandments – to love God and to love, Neighbor.
        i. We are not called to save the world. The greatest Commandment is not even to change the world for the better. It is to choose love…to put love first.

ii. Seeking after greatness has a way of obscuring, love – which *Hamilton* reminds us of quite tragically.
iii. The truth is that we fulfill the greatest Commandment in the small and ordinary moments of faithfulness – of taking time for worship and prayer, of remembering a birthday or showing up for a child's sporting event, of checking in on a friend in a time of loss, of offering (or accepting) forgiveness and choosing to rebuild after mistakes have been made. Sometimes love is holding on to the memory of 24 sailors lost at sea, giving their families a place to remember and to grieve and to hope in the story that goes on beyond us and beyond this mortal life.
iv. This doesn't mean that everything is easy, because true love is never easy. But it is an invitation to meaning and beauty beyond what we can earn or build in our own, and beyond what the logic of empire can ever imagine. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

NOTES:

- Connect to Washington's Retirement song in Hamilton
- Connection to POET Sunday – in dealing with people in grief and loss, we need to recognize that we don't have all the answers and can't solve things for them! Much more valuable to humbly share space with them
- My tendency toward being at the center of things, and my temptation to think I'm more important than I actually am. Example of recent sermons – Kelly's testimony being the perfect alternate sermon when I had a bad morning
- Connection to worth and value – don't have to be the center, or a success, or even accomplish anything in order to be truly loved by God.