

“Dealing with Disappointment”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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How do you handle disappointment? On several occasions I have said that the most difficult thing I do is bury a dream. I don't do that well and doubt that anyone does.

I wonder how Moses handled disappointment. What went through his mind as he stood on Mount Nebo and scanned the horizon? Everywhere he looked he saw the land of his dreams upon which he would never set foot.

For forty years, he led the ancient Israelites through one adventure after another to get them to this place. It had been a long, hard journey filled with challenges and insurrections, but they made it. They were within sight of the land that would make it possible for them to quit roaming and settle down. It was a land of abundant resources, including fresh water, wheat, barley, iron, copper, fig and olive trees. Everything needed to provide for their families was there.

Moses had to have mixed feelings as he gazed upon this land of opportunity. No doubt he was excited for the people he had grown to love with all his heart, yet he had to be in agony over the fact that he would not be able to lead them on the final leg of this historic journey. For a variety of reasons, he had to bury this dream and I know that must have been hard. It would have been for me.

Moses was not the only one that had to deal with disappointment in this story, though. I am confident that the news of his sudden death shocked those that had grown to love and appreciate him. This generation did not know life without him. He had always been their leader.

Could they go on without him? Would they have to bury the dream that was within sight? What did their future hold?

Can you identify with Moses and the Israelites? Do you know what it is like to be disappointed and uncertain about the future? Sure you do. How do you handle it when things don't go the way you thought they would? How do you bury a dream? How do you keep from becoming bitter or paralyzed? How do you recover?

I want us to consider these questions this morning using our text as a resource. For me, this is at the heart of this story and the place it intersects our lives.

The first thing we must do to cope with disappointment is to realize that life is full of surprises. We control far less than we think.

I consulted with our resident counselor and member, Gloria White about this sermon. She shared a book with me written by Dr. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*. Dr. Thurman was Dean Emeritus of Marsh Chapel at Boston University where he taught and preached. I appreciate what he writes about our topic.

“The setting for suffering is the world in which we live. Life is hazardous. Suffering is universal for mankind. There is no one who escapes.”

We are not going to go everywhere we want to go, do everything we want to do or have everything our hearts desire. Disappointments are inevitable.

At times we bring suffering upon ourselves and others by making bad decisions. It appears that Moses was not allowed to go into the Promise Land because of mistakes he made. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy.

On the other hand, there are times we are innocent victims of events or decisions beyond our control. Our suffering is part of the experience of freedom. As Thurman writes, “The innocent do suffer. This is the experience of man.”

I cannot read this passage without thinking of the last speech that Dr. Martin Luther King gave on that fateful trip to Memphis on April 3, 1968. You recall that he stood on the proverbial mountain top, scanned the horizon and uttered these words.

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day Dr. King was gunned down by an assassin's bullet. Life is hazardous, isn't it? It is full of surprises. Embracing reality is the first step to overcoming disappointment.

I believe the second thing we must do to deal with disappointment is to accept what we cannot change. The Serenity Prayer, which many attribute to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, certainly encourages us to do this.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

Evidently Moses did this. Oh, not at first. He debated God over this decision that kept him from entering the Promise Land. There was nothing about it that he liked and thought it was unfair. However, by the time he reached Mt. Nebo and gazed upon the Promise Land one last time, he had moved to acceptance. Don't overlook the fact that Moses never speaks in this portion of the narrative. How do you interpret this? I believe it is an indication that he embraced reality and accepted his fate.

Likewise, the people could not change the fact that Moses died and was no longer with them. It was time to turn their allegiance over to Joshua and they did.

I know it is our nature to struggle with events and decisions that we don't like. This, too, is a part of the experience of freedom. The time must come, however, when we accept what we cannot change and move in new directions.

How do we do this? We must turn to God and others for help. We need faith, family and friends to move beyond our disappointments and chart new courses. We cannot make this journey alone.

Gloria reminded me that suffering creates community. It draws people together. Everyone has a story to share and empathy to give. We must find that safe place to fall. I believe that Smoke Rise is one of those places. All of us are on a journey toward health and wholeness and I invite you to join us.

We must also draw close to God. Our faith is rooted in a God who cares for us, wants to sustain us in our darkest hours and help us move in new directions. There is no situation in life that Christian faith cannot embrace and change for the better.

When God became a man and dwelt among us, He became a party to human limitations and experienced suffering at the deepest level. Disappointment draped the cross on which he died. He understands pain and loss. He knows what it is like to bury dreams and dream new ones. He knows the importance of those words he uttered, "Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

What can God do for us when we are suffering? He can help us see disappointment as an opportunity for growth and maturity. Great strength can emerge from pain and suffering. Character can be purified through conflict. Suffering can profoundly change us for the better.

I believe that adversity is a wise teacher. It reveals things about life that we cannot learn any other time. Without suffering, we are very superficial people. We live in a fantasy world and never explore the mysteries of life and death. We fail to recognize what is really important and live up to our potential.

It is during the toughest of times that God, like a loving parent, draws closest to us and invites us to engage in honest and meaningful dialogue. He listens and speaks. He comforts and encourages. He gives us confidence and courage. He reveals new dreams and opens doors of

opportunities. He leads and guides. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, He exchanges His strength for our weakness.

He did this for the ancient Israelites after they lost Moses. He did it for the Jewish exiles, for whom this scripture was written, when they lived in Babylonian captivity. He did it for Jesus when he went through the agony of the cross. He did it for Paul when he suffered in a lonely prison separated from family and friends. He did it for John when he was banished on the island of Patmos. He will do it for you if you will let Him. I pray you will.