Moses was a giant, striding through history, whose influence and contributions to both faith and civilization continue even today, thousands of years later. His legendary story is rich and complex. Found in the bulrushes of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses (Moshe, an Egyptian name) was raised as a noble in Pharaoh’s court, in privilege and power. He killed the overseer for abusing a Hebrew slave, met God in burning bush in the wilderness, and learned the name of the Creator. YHWH - Yahweh, “I Am who I Am.” (Or, more accurately, “I will be Who I will Be.”) Moses called down plagues on Egypt and led the Hebrews on an Exodus into freedom. He met God again on Sinai and received the Ten Commandments and the Law, he forged for the chosen people the Covenant with Yahweh God. He took a band of mixed-race slaves, ‘Apiru in Egyptian and made then into ‘Ibrim, “Hebrew” in English, and led them to the Promised Land. Scripture describes them as a “mixed multitude.”

The name ‘Apiru, ‘Ibrim, means “Dusty Ones” literally, translated as “outside the camp,” or “outlaws” (from others’ perspectives). Everything points to a socioeconomic revolt of a diverse population of a class of forced laborers, who thrilled to the idea of only one God who was not Pharaoh, not a man at all, who desired their freedom and well-being, who asked of them only to love God and love one another. Old Testament scholar Norman Gottwald writes: “Depressed peasants of the countryside I posit as having formed the large majority in the ranks of the Israelite movement.” At the head of this movement that changed human history, was Moses. The concept that Yahweh God “found” Israel in the wilderness may not be just Biblical poetry, but theological truth. Monotheism was born in the desert, and Moses brought it to realization. Oral history of the oldest parts of the Bible had been passed down through generations. No one at the time wrote it down, or could. That came later. Moses shaped all of that into an integrated whole. Later, even Jesus, who himself stayed to the spoken word, referred to the Torah itself, the Old Testament law and covenant, simply as “Moses.” In these chapters of Deuteronomy Moses is near the end of his life and the end of the journey, across the river from the Promised Land.

So we continue our sermon series, Famous Last Words, with the last words of Moses, and his last words are a song he wrote. There are 3 songs in the Bible credited to Moses – one at the deliverance from the Red Sea, another in the Wilderness, and this one God told him to write on the verge of Canaan. This song has parallels in the Psalms (78, 105, 106). God had already told Moses he was not going to enter the Promised Land. The song was going to outlive him. The reason was, God knew that the people were going to break covenant, and go chasing off after pagan gods as soon as they crossed the River Jordan. So God said write a song. Make it so the children can learn it and be a witness for the future, so they can rescue this mess when the time comes. The song predicted that Israel would abandon the faith for a time, but also called them to remember what God had done for them. So Moses’ last words were the lyrics to the song.

All that was yet to happen, and that scene on the plains of Moab that day was, as Gene Peterson wrote, “totally satisfying: a congregation of free people, thoroughly trained in worship and obedience, ready to enter a land of promise.” Only, for reasons that are never really explained, Moses was not going to get to go with them. Perhaps he looked at that scene satisfied, and could have said, in Alexander Pope’s last words: “Here I am, dying of a hundred good symptoms.”
Still, it is sort of sad, this picture of Moses dying alone on the mountain with no one beside him, in sight of the Promised Land, and no one to bury him but God. Did Hemmingway write this chapter? Israel mourned below for 30 days, then moved on in the last leg of their journey, his song in their ears. He did at a last postscript: “This is no trifling matter. Take to heart what I told you, teach it to your children, that you will live long in the land across the river.”

Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner writes of Moses: “When God puts his finger on people, their troubles have just begun…” and says, “Nobody had ever known God’s name before Moses did, and nobody would have known it after except for his having passed it on: and with that thought in his heart up there on (the mountain) and that name on his lips, and with the sunset in his whiskers, he became in the end a kind of burning bush himself.”

Then I always remember the character played by Chief Dan George in the movie Little Big Man. The aging Indian warrior, Old Lodge Skins was ready to die, and told several of his tribe, “It is a good day to die.” He went out to his death pallet on a scaffold on stilts, as was Sioux custom. He lay there waiting until it started to rain, drops hitting him on the face until at last he sat up and said, “Perhaps it is not a good day to die.”

We don’t know why Moses didn’t go over Jordan with the rest; probably it was just his time. But he didn’t have to. I always ay, that’s why there’s more than one of us. Many scholars have made the point that the sea change in religion, law and community identity went way beyond the work of one generation. Thomas Cahill wrote, “That accomplishment is intergenerational may be the deepest of all Hebrew insights.” American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing worth doing can be done in a lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope.” Joseph Sittler points out that nearly all of Europe’s greatest cathedrals took multiple generations to complete: “It is okay to be part of the building process even though you may not be able to see the finished product. It is okay to now and yet not to know.”

A friend of mine, John Buchanan, preached on this text at 4th Presbyterian in Chicago, and he speculated on what Moses saw from Mt Nebo. “He could see Jericho, of course. He could see the Dead Sea to the west…I think for a moment at least, he saw all the way to Judah, to a little town called Bethlehem… and knew that his labor was not in vain.” We are not alone, but have been preceded by a long line of saints, who handed this church to us, and we will pass it on to others. If FPC had a Moses, it was not me nor Eugenia nor Bob Crutchfield, it was Ed Ramage.

The lessons today are these, I think: 1) No one is irreplaceable. 2) Moses worked hard right up to the end, a good thing. 3) The community’s future is more important than any one individual’s. 4) The leadership for the next generation is already in the community, in the congregation. And most importantly – 5) God is in charge. We are in good hands. Fear not! We are not alone.

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8 Sittler, Joseph. The Care of the Earth, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 84.