

Unmarked Memories and the Road Ahead

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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It was one of those radio news reports you only half-hear, and so you miss a few of the details in the beginning. I think the announcer said Galveston, Texas. It seems police were called to an elementary school because a construction crew working on the school playground found what they thought was a pipe bomb. After studying the cylindrical container for a while, the police determined that it probably was a pipe bomb; the bomb squad was called, and the decision was made to detonate the device. The children were evacuated from the school to a safe place. A detonator was attached and triggered, but there was no explosion. Indeed, there was only a small puff of dust.

What the police discovered, when they examined the remains of the cylinder, was that they had just detonated a time capsule buried by school children in 1956. The report ended at that point, but I could imagine the shattered remains of an “I Like Ike” button, perhaps newspaper accounts of Don Larsen’s perfect game against the Dodgers in the World Series, or maybe a poster from the Academy Awards’ best picture—“Around the World in Eighty Days.”

A bit of history, blown to smithereens in Texas. Not so much lost, really, because there are other places to go to find out about most of what happened in 1956. Not lost in the way, for example, so much of African American history seemed lost for so long. But a bit of history, nevertheless, done in by the local bomb squad.

What happens when we lose our sense of history, of course, is no laughing matter. We lose our sense of rootedness, our sense of identity. We forget who we are and whence we’ve come.

But sometimes history can be an impediment, an impediment to our embrace of the time at hand. Sometimes we can get so stuck in a past which was challenging and invigorating and wonderful, sometimes we can get so attached to a person who shaped us into who we have become, that we are handicapped and disabled for the present.

I think of a prominent southern church which had been a substantial force for good in the troubled days of the 1960s. The commitments of those days had led that congregation into a ministry of outreach which tried to build decent housing for many of the poor people of the community. Dozens of houses were built, and others were renovated to provide better insulation and indoor plumbing. The results were tangible and visible, and the people were rightly proud of what they had been able to do.

But twenty years later, they were still talking about that time, about the days when they rose up to meet a need. Twenty years later there were other needs to be addressed, other crises needing solutions, but many church members would say, “But you remember the ‘60s, don’t you? Those were the days.” Sometimes history can get in the way of the present.

It seems on the surface like a small textual detail, but I wonder if some such concern wasn’t behind God’s burial of Moses in an unmarked grave. This scene from the end of Deuteronomy, is a moment of sadness, but also a tender and touching moment. After forty years of leading the Hebrew people through the wilderness,

Moses is allowed only to catch a distant glimpse of the promised land. Then he dies. And the Hebrew says, "God buried Moses in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but no one knows his burial place to this day." God gathers the body of his old friend, and buries him in the desert. Most translators can't handle it. So far as I know only the Jerusalem Bible and the New International Version get it right. Most simply say, "He was buried."¹

God knew that Moses' work was done. God knew what lay ahead for the children of Israel: a land of milk and honey, yes, but a land flowing with sweat and tears as well. God knew their tendency to seek security in what lay behind them. Perhaps God knew the people might even set up a shrine to Moses and keep returning. So the grave was unmarked. And the people mourned for thirty days, but then moved on, accompanied by memories of Moses, but more importantly by the Torah.

There are in the lives of all of us remarkable people, moments, events which have shaped us and changed us. There is always a tendency to want to hold onto to them, to frame them in our minds as larger than life, to keep coming back to them. But as soon as we enshrine such memories, they begin to lose their power for good.

We humans have a tendency to want to freeze those moments and people and events which have transformed us. But the future is always upon us, and the road stretches out always ahead of us.

Each of us is on a journey. The journey began long before we were born; our feet were set upon it by others who preceded us in faith; the journey has taken us through some moments of great importance, has brought us into contact with some people of lasting influence. But we honor those events and those moments and those people best by embracing the journey for ourselves, and moving on to the challenges that await us, accompanied by good and gracious memories and by the presence of Christ.

In Memphis, Tennessee, at the site of the old Loraine Motel, which is full of painful memories, the National Civil Rights Museum has been built. And in one part of that building is a booth, where a visitor can stand and, by pressing buttons, listen to recordings of the speeches of Martin Luther King. An attendant acknowledges what one would know already: the most popular recording is the "I Have a Dream" speech given at the Lincoln Memorial. "What's second?" the visitor asks. "The last one. The 'I have been to the mountaintop' address he gave just hours before he was shot and killed." A speech that evoked the image of Moses, looking into the promised land.²

Martin King was too soon gone. And maybe people thought that his death would spell the end of the cause for which he gave his life. But what those people failed to calculate was the intensity of the march, or the vision which prompted it. Rather than cripple the movement, memories of Martin only intensified the resolve. The road still lay ahead. Andrew Young tells how the people prepared to face it.

On Good Friday morning, thirty-one years ago last April, Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and others meeting with them, planned to disobey an injunction forbidding a civil rights demonstration in downtown Birmingham. Bull Conner, the police chief, was a law-and-order man. Dr. King knew that civil disobedience would lead to his arrest, but he believed he had to march. What he did not know was that Bull Conner would unleash police dogs and turn fire hoses on black bystanders who complained about the rough treatment of the ministers and leaders arrested that day. The spectacle drew national attention to the struggle. Some thought that with King and Abernathy in jail, the people would lose their spirit, would back down.

Two days later, however, on Easter Sunday, after worship, some 5,000 people assembled at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church to march downtown to the jail and pray

for those, including Martin King, who had been arrested. But when they left the church and reached the barricades about two blocks from the jail, Bull Conner was waiting with police and dogs and fire trucks blocking the street. The crowds came to a halt and knelt down to pray while Andrew Young and Wyatt T. Walker tried to reason with Conner. Writing about that day, Young remembers that they had been talking with Conner for about five minutes when the Rev. Charles Hillups stood up and hollered, "The Lord is in this movement. We're going on to the jail. Off your knees!" Young writes:

Everybody in the front rows...got up and started walking right toward the barricades and massed police. Stunned at first, Conner yelled, "Stop 'em. Stop 'em." But the police didn't move a muscle.

I've never seen anything like it. They just stood there watching as if they were transfixed. Even the police dogs that had been growling and straining at the leash when we first marched up became perfectly calm. The firemen just stood there holding hoses. We walked right on them, and Conner yelled, "Turn on the hoses, turn on the hoses!" But they didn't move. I saw one fireman, literally with tears in his eyes, just let the hose drop to his feet. Our people marched right between the red fire trucks singing, "I want Jesus to walk with me." Not rushing, just a very slow, serious march.

We marched on to the park across from the jail, where we reconvened to sing to the people in jail. I'll never forget one old woman who got happy when she marched through the barricades. She shouted, "Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one mo' time!"

Conner stood there cussing and fussing. His policemen refused to arrest us, his firemen had refused to hose us, and his dogs had refused to bite us.

From that Easter Sunday on, the movement gathered strength.³

From that moment on, the movement also knew that it could embrace the future without Martin King, if necessary.

Without a sense of history, we lose our identity. But freezing our history can deny us a future. A future which God intends. A road which God has set before us.

"God buried Moses in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but no one knows his burial place to this day." What we *do* know is the promise of God, and equipped with that promise and with graciously powerful memories, we have all we need for the road ahead.

NOTES

¹ My understanding of this translation is gained from remarks made by James Sanders to the 1993 Moveable Feast preaching consortium, Malibu, California.

² I borrow this scenario from personal accounts of the museum offered by James Lowry, pastor of Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis.

³ Andrew Young, "Young memoirs: Parting of the Red Sea," *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 17 July 1983.