

**"TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT:
LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK"**

Deuteronomy 31:1-3.6-9

July 30, 2017

What would you write about yourself, if you knew it would be read at your own funeral or memorial service? I think that's a fascinating question. Maybe you have thought about your own service or your own obituary or what you might want written on your gravestone? My favorite gravestone inscription was written by George Bernard Shaw. It says, "I knew if I waited around long enough, something like this was bound to happen." And then there's this profound message found on a tombstone in Maryland: "Here lies an Atheist. All dressed up and no place to go." Can you guess Martin Luther King, Jr's epitaph? "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

Each of these statements tells us a great deal about its subject: Shaw was quite clever. The atheist's people were quite disappointed in his choice to be a non-believer. And King's epitaph in two sentences sums up his whole ministry message.

Of course, you hope not to end up like poor old Eleanor Rigby, who lyricist Paul McCartney of the Beatles wrote, "was buried along with her name, for nobody came." Perhaps in your daydreams you have imagined for yourself a full sanctuary for your remembrance service, overflowing with people who are crying and mourning your loss. You might see someone famous celebrating your life—an opera singer or at least a smoky-voiced lounge singer, a country music star perhaps, or a rock-n-roller. You have politicians who line up at your casket to wish you farewell--well maybe no politicians--but important people nevertheless. so that others could be sure that you indeed mattered to the world.

Maybe you just see a few devoted family members and close friends at your gravesite, skipping the big splash church or funeral parlor service, a quiet affair of the heart of which you are an intimate guest. You might not care if anyone else is there at all.

Either way, it's nice if *somebody* eulogizes you, tells your story, if you will, saying things gentle and affirming about you. We all want to be remembered fondly. We want to have others know about us and be comforted in the thought that though passed away from this earthly life, we now walk with God in everlasting life.

But what if, when you die, your eulogizer can think of *nothing* positive to say about you? What if you hire someone while you are still alive to write your obituary and when you read it, you are horrified to see what others say about you?

This is what happens to the character played by Shirley MacLaine in tonight's film, "The Last Word." It is the last film in our Summer Festival, and it's one with a powerful message. I hope you will join us to watch and discuss it.

Harriet Lauler is a socialite, a snob who is tired of going to her friends' funerals. It's not so much that she is sad at their loss-that really doesn't bother her, because she is a very self-centered and narcissistic person. She knows everything and she does everything better than anyone else. The reason she doesn't like to attend funerals is that she doesn't want to hear any more overstuffed, contrived, puffed-up eulogies when she knows better about the dear departed. She knows how flawed they really were.

And, when she can tell the story so much better herself, she *sure* doesn't want an unsupervised someone else writing her eulogy or obituary! She exclaims early on in the film:

I am a reasonable woman. I have never been surprised by anything. As a reasonable woman, the thought of leaving my obituary to chance is completely unreasonable to me!

She hires the obituary writer at the local newspaper to pre-write her obituary, so that she can edit it to her own specifications and have it kept on file to be used when she dies. She's not planning on dying anytime soon, mind you; she just isn't taking any chances on what will be said about her. She gives the writer a list of references, and pays her to have these people interviewed so that their good opinions of her can be recorded for posterity's sake.

Today's scripture passage has Moses giving *his* own death speech to the Israelites he has led out of captivity and into the Promised Land. The text tells us he is 120 years of age. This age is not to be taken literally by the reader; suffice it to say that when Moses delivers his speech, he is really, really old by the standards of the day.

The writers of his story want to make clear that God forgives, but that God does not forget those who question God's call on their lives. Way back in the book of Exodus, when Moses is tapped by God to be God's messenger to Pharaoh, Moses balks at God's direction to him that he be the voice of the Lord to the pagan oppressor of God's Israelite people.

If you recall, we studied this story when we watched the film, "The King's Speech." Moses was a stutterer; he questioned his ability to be God's messenger, suggesting that his brother Aaron would be a more suitable selection. God lost temper with Moses, assuring him that no mistake had been made and that he would indeed serve well God's purpose.

Moses reverse his denial and serves God faithfully for decades thereafter, facing off against Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army, leading the people through the Red Sea into safety beyond. He receives and delivers to the people God's law of the Ten Commandments. He suffers

in the wilderness for forty years right along with his people due to God's judgments against them for their unfaithfulness. Moses leads the people finally to the Promised Land, but despite all that Moses has done in God's name, he is forbidden to enter the land of milk and honey. It is a punishment from God on Moses that he must stay behind to die alone for his earlier lack of obedience and trust. This is a very, very harsh God that the story's writer brings to us.

How fair is that? If I were Moses, I think I might feel pretty bitter about God's judgment against me. wouldn't you? It was human nature for Moses to question his ability to be able to carry out God's plan to free the Israelites. Wouldn't we *all* balk if called upon for such a large responsibility, especially if we felt like we lacked the necessary skill and courage to carry out God's wishes?

Well, no matter the fairness; God punishes Moses by forcing him to watch from afar the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land. Yet, in his death speech, he praises God and presents God to the people as

their only true God. His own eulogy is purposed with seeing to it that the people not repeat his mistake and their mistake, that henceforth they follow God and God's laws.

Just before this passage, Moses tells the people,

I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today: I place before you Life and Death. Blessing and Curse. Choose life! so that you and your children will live. And love God, your God, listening obediently to God, firmly embracing God. Oh yes, God is life itself, a long life settled on the soil that God, your God, promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

His death speech, his eulogy if you will, is his final statement of faith. His life, his life's work, and his legacy is in securing his people's future in God. That's all he wants the people to remember from his life. "Be strong," he tells them. "Take courage. Don't be

intimidated. Don't give [your enemies] a second thought because God, your God, is striding ahead of you." In other words, Moses is preaching to the choir to do and be everything he should have done and been, but did not and was not. His eulogy, spoken from his heart, is a fervent attempt to get the people to follow God and to be God's own people.

Moses ran out of time. He had 120 years, but he ran out of time. Harriet still had time, and she decided to remake her life so as to make her eulogy sound better when her time ran out. Moses says all you need to remember is that God runs with you your whole race, your whole life. Put your trust in God, your God, and let God make of your life what God will.

It's rodeo season here in the West. Cheyenne Frontier Days wraps up today, and soon the county fairs and rodeos will dot the countryside. It seems fitting that Lisa is today going to sing to you in the Offertory Tim McGraw's ballad, "Live Like You Were Dying." It's a

great song and a message that, like that of Moses, seeks to inspire us to change our hearts—change them while there is still time. Let's lead into our Offertory with our own response, in our familiar hymn, the words of which are printed in your bulletin. Let us remember that God is good and that it is good and right for us to give back to God's work through this church. And the people sing,

"Change my heart, O God, make it ever new;

Change my heart, O God, may I be like you."

May It be so.