

Dt 34 & Mt 22:34-46
23 October 2011

“Good Words”

Stories have come down through the ages about the deaths of heroes and legendary figures. Everyone in the land would be in a state of mourning. Sometimes tales would be told of their courageous exploits, their daring deeds. As the time of burial approached, a detachment of servants or soldiers would be selected. They would be instructed to travel a great distance into the wilderness and bury their champion.

Upon their return, they would immediately be slain! No one was to know the place of burial!

In Deuteronomy 34, Moses climbs Mount Nebo, where he sees the Promised Land. The Lord tells him, “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there” (v. 4). (I’ll get back to that in a moment.) We’re told in verses 5 and 6: “Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.”

The Good News Bible says, the “Lord buried him.” That’s based on **one** reading of the Hebrew, which says, “He buried him.” That can **also** be read, “He was buried.” There’s a problem with identifying who “he” is. In any event, we’re told that no one knows where Moses was buried. Maybe it was important to avoid having a place that would become a shrine—and there are legends that Moses ascended to heaven.

As for the Lord forbidding Moses to enter the land, the reason is given in Numbers 20. In the wilderness of Zin, the people are complaining because there’s no water. Moses has dealt with this before! The Lord tells him to command the rock to produce water. Moses strikes the rock with his staff, and water comes flowing out.

However, the Lord tells him that “you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (v. 12).

All of that, because Moses struck the rock, instead of speaking to it! That’s a pretty high bar to set for entrance into the Promised Land!

Besides all of the stuff I’ve mentioned, Deuteronomy 34 contains a eulogy. “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (vv. 10-12).

The word “eulogy” comes from two Greek words that mean “good words.” We have other words with that prefix “eu-,” like “euphemism” and “euthanasia.” To eulogize someone is to “speak well” of them, to praise them. It is possible to eulogize someone who is still alive; we just don’t usually think of it that way.

Maybe you noticed that, even though Moses’ behavior kept him out of the land, **no one**, we’re told, has ever come close to him in signs and wonders given by the Lord. He’s one of those heroes whose exploits are exalted, whose deeds of daring are declared!

And maybe you also noticed that this is all post-mortem. When Moses was alive, the people gave him plenty of grief!

But I like that literal meaning of eulogy: “good words.” There’s so much more to it than mere praise. I’m reminded of a line from the Christmas prayer of confession in our Book of Common Worship. “We confess that we have not welcomed the light, or trusted good news to be good.”

We really are looking at “good words” in a prophetic sense of the term. And even though the words—even though the news—may be good, that still doesn’t mean that it’s always welcome!

My wife has heard me make a certain comment more than once. (And she is a good cook!) I’ll go into the kitchen and ask her what she’s preparing, and sometimes she’ll describe the dish, listing the ingredients. If I have a certain look on my face, she’ll reassure me, saying, “It’s good for you.” My response is often, “I’m **sure** it’s good for me, but does it **taste** good?”

You know, good words can be like foul-tasting medicine.

Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan priest in New Mexico, authored a book that I’ve been reading for the past year. It’s a series of daily meditations called *On the Threshold of Transformation*. This particular book is devoted to male spirituality, but there’s plenty of benefit for women.

In part of his book, he explores different archetypes. (Students of mythology and psychology would be more familiar with that idea.) Archetypes are basically universal qualities or patterns within us. Our challenge is to work toward keeping all of these in balance.

I’m especially thinking of his comparison of the king with the prophet, or the wise man, the sage. Rohr says, “The human ego feels more comfortable with kings than with wise men. It prefers answer givers over spiritual guides [or wise men, prophets]. Kings give rulings that must bring clarity and order; spiritual guides invite us into the messiness of our interior lives and most social issues.”¹

Getting back to my comments about “good words,” we don’t always know **what is** good for us. Sometimes we don’t **like** what is good for us. It might be safe to say that we **frequently** don’t like what is good for us!

One way that can be played out is by rushing for answers. Depending on our personality type, we’re comfortable with varying levels of uncertainty, varying degrees of ambiguity. Some people can tolerate great amounts of uncertainty, others, very little. The temptation is to settle for a quick decision, rather than go through the process of discovery. That process can be mind-numbingly tedious, and it can be excruciatingly painful.

Keeping all of that in mind, Rohr continues, “We...prefer kings to prophets. Prophets speak the truth, and hardly anyone is comfortable with that.

“The prophet is the highest form of the...wise man archetype, who tells the truth no matter what the cost.” I like what he says next. “Although thousands of churches are named ‘Christ the King,’ you’d be hard put to find one named ‘Christ the Prophet’ anywhere in the world. At least I never have. That’s how much we fear prophets, but

¹ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 327.

prophet is a title that Jesus never rejected or denied, and even claimed as his dishonored position.”²

He makes a reference to Mark 6, where Jesus is teaching in his hometown synagogue, and the folks there get offended. Jesus says to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (v. 4). It sounds like, in the best tradition of the prophets, Jesus is following in the footsteps of Moses!

In his gospel, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, one who also speaks good words that are often rejected.

Today’s passage in Matthew begins, “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him” (vv. 34-35). “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees...” We need to see how Matthew arranges this to know what’s going on here.

Right before this, some Sadducees, who don’t believe in resurrection, have told Jesus that crazy story about the woman who was the wife of seven different brothers. When one brother died, the **next** one took her as his wife. It went that way until all seven brothers were dead. The Sadducees want to know whose wife she will be in the resurrection—something they say can’t happen.

I like the way they finish their story. “Last of all, the woman herself died” (v. 27). I think the poor woman had had quite enough of **that** family!

Okay, back to the lawyer the Pharisees send to test Jesus. He asks him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (v. 36). Jesus responds, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (v. 37). He’s quoting part of what’s called the Shema, which is found in Deuteronomy 6. It’s a statement of faith that begins, “Hear, O Israel” (v. 4). “Shema” means “hear” in Hebrew.

Jesus goes a step farther, though. He joins **with** the love of God, the love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). According to Jesus, it is impossible to love God if we do not love our fellow human beings. In fact, we could easily make the case that “neighbor” extends to the animals and to the environment. If we don’t love God’s good creation, it’s pretty hard to say that we love God.

What does that look like? How do we know when and where that love of God is present? That love, that Spirit, is present in our experiences of loss, which we all have.

This past Monday morning, Banu and I had to euthanize our Shetland Sheepdog, who was almost fifteen years old. (“Euthanize,” one of those “eu-” words.) I know it isn’t the same as losing a human member of the family, or having someone simply disappear, but it is a loss.

It seems that Jesus is saying that the love of God is present where we love each other. That love is certainly present where we respect, where we forgive, where we care. It’s present where we summon up the courage to speak good words.

Our next hymn is “Though I May Speak.” That first verse says it well: “Though I may speak with bravest fire / And have the gift to all inspire / And have not love, my words are vain / As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.”

² Rohr, 328.

Our words are good words when we do not shy away from being the prophet of God, speaking them with the power of love. Remember, this business of good words, of eulogy, is a double-edged sword. It's more than praise, speaking well of others. But like Moses and Jesus, in the finest tradition of the prophets, it is also the good that we often reject—the good that we don't want to hear. Still, it is good for us!