

A personal note, if you will, about my sermons. I plan my sermons out a few months. I'm already working on sermons for June and July!

Back in February, as we began the season of Lent, I was looking at April and May. I began to imagine what it might be like for the disciples and the early church that first year after the resurrection, as they came up on the first anniversary of Easter.

We have stories in the Acts of the Apostles of those first days after Pentecost, and then it skips a few years to Paul and his conversion.

I tried to think about what stories from Scripture, and remember, they were Jews, still worshipping at the Temple and gathering with other followers of Jesus.

What stories from their Bible would inspire them, encourage them, support them as they moved forward in this new community of faith.

So, of course, I turned to Moses. To put the life of Moses in biblical perspective, four of the first five books of the Bible center on his life. Only Jesus, taking the whole of the New Testament, has more written about him than Moses in the Bible.

Moses is the one who led the people of Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery...he is the one who climbed Mt. Sinai to talk with God and receive the Ten Commandments.

He led his people through the frustration of dust and dullness in the wilderness, bringing them to the Jordan, ready to cross into the Promised Land.

But Moses would not be able to go in. Our scripture lesson this morning describes the last days of the life of Moses.

As our text says, “The Lord showed him all the land...” He dies, and God buries him. But the work of God goes on.

That's the story for the people of Israel and the early church, and for you and me as their spiritual descendants: The work of God goes on.

That's what Paul is writing about in our Scripture Reading, one of his earliest letters, laying out the tasks for God's work to continue, following what had been described of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles.

As I prepared for this sermon I saw that the first Sunday after Easter was on the final day of the Masters golf tournament, so that's why we're going to consider this in the framework of the game of golf, with a particular focus on playing the back nine.

Now, people often say to me, “You know, I can worship God in my own way on the golf course.”

I don't really buy that, and you need to know that before you give me that excuse about not being in worship.

Oh, I've heard the name of God mentioned on golf courses, but not in ways that I can repeat in worship; and I've heard prayers and promises made to God on the golf course.

And I've heard a lot of people say about golf, “I'm finished with this game”, usually uttered in frustration when their ball, like Peter, sinks in the water!

The reality is that a round of golf is not finished until the back nine is played. For you non-golfers, the game is divided into 18 holes, the front nine and the back nine.

It is so easy in life to leave things unfinished, unsaid, incomplete. Quitting in frustration, giving up too early; stopping after the front nine and not playing the back nine of life.

There is much that has been said about Moses not getting to go into the promised land, that he didn't complete the back nine of his life.

But I want you to look again in our story that says, “There has never been another like Moses, for the Lord talked to him face to face.”

I think that says that Moses was remembered and revered for finishing well, completing the task God had given. What about you and me?

I would like to begin by saying that on the back nine of life, there is rough to be played.

The rough is the high grass, off the fairway, and the further off the fairway, the rougher the rough is... I speak from experience!

The life of Moses was not lived completely in the fairway. The great dream of his life had been to lead his people into the Promised Land, but it was not to be.

At a crucial point along the way he had disobeyed God, and thus would not be allowed to enter, as God says to Moses in our lesson this morning, “You will see it, but you will not enter it.”

It seems harsh, doesn't it? But, the truth is that all of us will do some of our playing, our living, ‘in the rough.’

There are challenges and hazards in life, some we cannot understand, but we have to face them as they come.

You can appreciate what Ashleigh Brilliant said, “It's not easy taking my problems one at a time when they refuse to get in line.” Sometimes, our problems come in bunches.

In the game of golf, you have to ‘play it where it lies.’ We have to take life as it comes at us, and that's not always easy.

But we don't give up, even when we sometimes have to play it from the rough.

And secondly, there's an order to it; a course to follow, hole by hole; and there's out of bounds, penalties if you go off course.

Moses did not enter the Promised Land because he had disobeyed God.

He was out of bounds, and when you hit out of bounds in golf, there are penalty strokes!

We have a tendency to think of boundaries as negatives, binding us from being free. But look again at Moses.

Remember how he stood in the smoke on the peak of Mt. Sinai when the directions of life, the framework of living, were given; the Ten Commandments were handed down.

These are the course directions for our living that set us free to enjoy the way God wants us to go.

Listen to them this way:

- We are free to worship God and God alone.
- We are free to have nothing that overshadows God in our life.
- We are free to set aside a day for worship and rest, giving our bodies and our minds time to be refreshed and renewed.
- We are free to give honor to our parents, to care for them all of their life.
- We are free to value life,
- free to keep our vows in marriage and help others keep theirs,
- free to value the truth and tell the truth,
- free to rejoice in the good fortune of others and,
- free from jealousy or envy that would bind us to negative living.

If we are to complete our course in life, complete the task God gives us, to finish the back nine well, we have these boundaries that are designed to give us a sense of closeness to God, a sense of well-being for our own lives.

These put us all on the right track, the signposts along the way that say, “This is the right way; walk in it!”

On the back nine of life: some playing is in the rough, you play by the rules, and thirdly, there is time for recovery.

Look again at our text. God let Moses see the Promised Land... then “he buried him.” You say, “That's recovery?!”

Think about it! How would you like God to be one who officiates at your funeral, to say the words for your eulogy, and then prepare the gravesite? Moses is the only person this happened to.

What this shows me is that while Moses had disobeyed, he was still precious and special in the sight of God. He had never moved beyond God's love and care.

Reality is that the back nine of life is a good place to make some positive recovery because God still cares for you and me.

Lee Trevino, one of golf's most popular players, talked about how the Champions' Tour was really a good thing for the Senior golfers, but he went on to recommend that there be a Super Seniors' Tour: you had to be 95 or older to play. The format, he said, would be simple: one hole a day for three days, and the winner would be the golfer who could remember his score!

It's a good thing, on the back nine of life, to remember the score, to reflect on where you've been, how you've played.

One way to do that is to think in terms of repairs on the course. Along the way in a round of golf, you 'fix the divots,' 'repair the greens,' and 'smooth the sand traps'; thoughtful gestures of civility to others who are coming behind you, who will be playing the game as well.

If you think about it, there are some things that need repairing in our lives as we move through the back nine, and the sooner we repair them, the better off we are.

For example, there are forgiving words that need to be said. Much of the agony of life could be eased and dealt with, the load lightened, if we could just bring ourselves to say, "I'm sorry."

And along with making some repairs, I would say that this time for recovery includes finding some things that have been lost.

A golf ball gets hit off course, and no one thinks twice about looking for it. So, what about some spiritual disciplines that have gotten lost, neglected, gone off course?

Many people need to be asking when was the last time they read their Bible with any regularity, attended a Bible study where they were challenged to hear God's word and grow as disciples, said their prayers beyond a brief nod to God or presented the Lord with a shopping list of things they want.

How many of us have lost the capacity of wonder, of seeing the beauty of God in our everyday life, or hearing the laughter of God in life all around us?

As Amanda McBroom wrote:
*It's the heart afraid of breaking
That never learns to dance.
It's the dream afraid of waking
That never takes the chance;
It's the one who won't be taken
Who cannot seem to give;
And the soul afraid of dying
That never learns to live.*

Playing the back nine of life means most of all: Follow your purpose to live the love of God, like Moses and the people of God.

Like the disciples and you and me who have been met by the love of God in Jesus Christ...the person who has changed everything and whose spirit was at work in them that first year and the years afterward and now in us.

As there are burdens that weigh people down, as there are challenges that exceed our strength, as there is suffering that overwhelms our heart, we can respond in love to love for love because the work of God goes on!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.