

Seeing the Big Picture

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

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First Congregational UCC, Asheville, NC

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

When I was in junior high school, I loved to play basketball. I would play out in the driveway, orchestrating situations in which my team was behind, and needed me to pull them to victory. We would be behind 10 points with a minute to go, and I would have to shoot incredible shots and have unbelievable energy to bring home the victory. And of course, we never lost.

I was in a waiting room this past week, reading the most recent edition of Sports Illustrated, and came across a story of my driveway dreams. Last spring, Conference USA was hosting the tournament championship game between Louisville and Memphis. The winning team got to join the 64 teams from across the country in the NCAA national championship tournament – what is known as the Big Dance. It's the goal of every team to make it to the Dance. As the clock ticked down to zero, Memphis – a team that had played beyond expectation – found itself two points behind. But a young man named Darius Washington had been fouled while shooting a 3 point shot. He went to the foul line to shoot. If he made all three his team would win. If he made two his team would tie and they would go into overtime.

Darius stepped to the line. He was the only player on the court. He was the only player who could make a difference. With thousands of people watching, and many more thousands watching on TV, he calmly hit the first shot. But he missed the second – and it all came down to the final free throw. He bounced the ball three times, shot, the ball rolled around the rim – and you know what happened – it did not go in. Memphis lost.

Washington fell to the ground in anguish. His father had taught him to cover his face if he cried in public, so he pulled his jersey up over his eyes as he cried. There were no excuses, no blaming, no bravado. He had the opportunity of a lifetime, and he couldn't make it happen.

Sometimes things don't work out the way we have always imagined. It was fascinating that the talk shows and sports fans did not beat up on this young man. Because he had been so humble, had shown his own humanity in such a way as he did, people felt a lot of empathy for him. I bet there were a lot of people who saw their dreams on the line that night, and knew that they had not been good enough to even make the team. A Presbyterian minister said in a sermon the next day – In Darius Washington we experience our own brokenness. We run into our own humanity.

We know what it is like to imagine and fantasize about something. It is a crucial part of childhood to have an active imagination and to know the full joy of wonder. But there are limits to what we can do. Peggy Way, recently retired professor of Pastoral Care at Vanderbilt University and then at Eden Theological Seminary, has recently shared in her new book that in all her years of doing lectures and preaching, she has never been asked to speak about limitations. But all of us have our limits. It is our human condition. Our imagination runs into the reality of our limitations, and we sometimes are not able to do what we hope to do. And it doesn't seem fair.

Such is the case with our story today. Moses had been called to lead the captive people to a new land. He had learned to meet with God and work out a plan – often a plan that seemed far beyond the realm of possibility. To go and tell Pharaoh – let my people go. What foolishness is that? And yet, God’s imagination can surpass our own imagination, and together God and Moses made a pretty strong team.

We have been following the story for over a month now. Watching as Moses has gone back to the mountain time and again to talk things over with God. Watching as the people struggled with their own trust issues with this God of freedom and this leader of a liberation movement. Remembering how many times they have wandered away from Moses and God – only to be called back again. But somehow they hold together.

Now we come to the end of the story. Or at least an ending – for every story has many beginnings and endings. And Moses is once again called to the mountain to talk with God. This time he has met up with the angel of death, and he knows his time to die has come. He is 120 years old, so he can’t argue that he didn’t get to live long enough. But he is in sight of the Promised Land – if he could only live a little longer, he could fulfill the dream and bring the people home. It doesn’t seem fair that God would end Moses part of the story now.

There is a suggestion in the story that Moses doesn’t get to go to the Promised land because he has not been faithful himself – that at times he did not trust God all the way. It seems a harsh judgment given what they have been through together. There is no other leader in Hebrew history that is so strong and faithful as Moses. Why would God stop short of letting Moses finish what they had worked on so long and hard? It seems unfair to us. But God can see what we cannot see. And a great leader does not try to make a place for himself or herself, but instead has the great pleasure of saying – I have done my best, and now it is time for you to carry on. A great leader calls on the people to continue what has been begun.

Martin Luther King Jr. must have had a premonition of his death when he preached his last sermon. He said: I have been to the mountaintop, and I have seen the Promised Land ... I may not get there with you, but I have seen it. And there was no anger or pain in his voice. It was a call to keep on keeping on. It was an invitation to embrace the vision, each one doing their part. And there even seemed to be joy in his words, he seemed to be upheld by the promise of God that ultimately is what sustains each of us.

We are called to do our part – and not for our personal vision, but for God’s vision. Peter Gomes says it like this: “The justice of God is not that we are allowed to complete what we have begun, but the grace of God is that we are allowed to participate in what God has begun.” (Sermons, p. 158) Very few of us get to see our work completely finished. None of us die with all our dreams accomplished. That’s why so many of you who have retired seem busier now than you did when you had full time work – you are still living out your own dreams and doing the work you feel called to do. And what a gift you are to us.

No, we are not called to make it all happen, we are not responsible for seeing things to the end, but we are called to make a beginning. If we stood in our driveways as young adolescents and knew that the percentages were against our ever making a college basketball team, much less making it to play professional ball, we may never take the time to push ourselves and work towards our dreams in the first place. We have to imagine and dream and give ourselves to the dream. But as we grow older, we realize there is a bigger picture that we can only partly see – we can see it by virtue of our own experience of brokenness, our own place in the community of creation. We who are Christian are told the story from the

very start – the story of our people who God made covenant with, promised to love and care for, promised to never abandon. The story of a people learning to live into God’s vision of community where we may not have everything we can possibly imagine, but where every one of us has what we need plus more to spare.

Our task is to get going – to find a place to enter the story and make our start. The great work of justice is often started not by the great leaders who carry us through, but by acts of kindness and courage by people just living their everyday lives. People who see a small piece of God’s vision and take it on. People who invest their gifts, their energy, their money, their lives to make the world more just, more loving, more God like.

No, we cannot see what the end will bring. The people who began First Congregational Church in 1914 felt called to start a new church that would be a progressive and liberal voice in Asheville, but they could have never imagined us as we are today. They did their part, and what they did gave us a place to continue our own journeys of seeking and learning and doing this work of justice. But they could not possibly have imagined us being an Open and Affirming church, and now soon to be a downtown church. We ourselves have only begun to understand these things. There is a lot more story to be lived out – and over the years to come the names and faces will change as people come and go, but the work will continue as each day, each year, we continue to do our part, give our best, learn to follow the vision and live in covenant with God and each other.

We remember the names of those who led us. But we don’t yet know the names of those who might be influenced by us. I pray that there are people who come here, who learn the story, who find in themselves a passion for this God we proclaim and this love we live – maybe someone will come from us and take on a piece of God’s vision in a way that makes a big difference. We just don’t know. It is not for us to see. What we do know is that the story, the journey, is ours for the living. And when we live it faithfully, we find our own lives.

The future is God’s to know. What we know is now. And we are called now to live our lives according to our best understanding of God’s vision. The Bible ultimately ends with a vision, not a conclusion. “I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. ... Behold I am making all things new.” The imagery is inviting, but not conclusive. We are called “to see in what is what can and ought to be.” (Peter Gomes, p. 157) The ending is not a final place, but rests solely with God. Our Promised Land is our life with God.

The nature of our existence is surrounded by process that will never be complete. For we can see only in part – but someday, we will see the big picture. We will see it all when the time comes for us to go to the other side of life, when we come to our rest – when we are called home to be with God.

A couple of years ago I walked with my dad up to the edge of his death. I watched as he died a little more each day, knowing that he could not remember much of what his life had been because of his Alzheimer’s. So I did a lot of remembering for him and with him. In the process, I wondered what it would be like when my day came to meet face to face with death. When I look back, what will I see? And I realized that I cannot know that until that time comes. But I also realized that I cannot wait to know more – our lives are an adventure that happen one day at a time. And each day we are given the opportunity to decide – how will I invest myself into this day? How will I use my time, my talents, my money, my energy? How will I live into God’s vision for the world? For to be able someday to die a good death, we must today live a good life.

I have often looked at great art – and wondered how in the world the artist was able to paint or create something so magnificent. I wouldn't know where to begin. I am often afraid of making a mistake. Of starting in the wrong place. But I am sure that every artist begins by taking the paint brush, or the clay, or whatever the art objects are – and doing something. We will mess up more often than not. We will fall on our faces, we will have to start over again and again. But the important thing is that we start. We cannot see the big picture just yet, but we never will see it if we don't try something.

Next week Dr. Marvin Ellison will be the guest of People of Faith for Just Relationships at an event we are calling Thinking Justly – Living Faithfully: A New Perspective on Same Sex Marriage. He is one of the newest voices calling us to make all our relationships just and caring. He carries on the work that many others have been doing for years. Most of those people we will never know or even hear their names. But we continue with this work because others had the courage to start. In 1969 there was a case before the Supreme Court called Love vs. Virginia. It was about the legal right for people of different races to marry. The court voted in favor of interracial marriage, but popular opinion did not catch up with that ruling until 1994 – 25 years later. What is important is that we do our part, that we start, that we live our lives the best we can. We can't possibly know what the world will be like in 25 more years, or what the new issues will be that face society and the church. But we know the story of God's people and how, from the very beginning, we have been called to live in covenant with God and one another. That is what we continue to know and continue to live out of.

Moses saw the Promised Land – which was in and of itself a great ending to his life. He also was able to pass on the responsibility of leadership to a new leader – to a young man named Joshua. To bless the work and pass it on. That is what we get to do. Start where we can. Do the best we can. Be as faithful as we can. And then take our rest. And looking back, maybe we will see that we have lived our lives well, that while we have made numerous mistakes, even falling miserably in the biggest moments perhaps, we have done our best to live faithful lives. That is all any of us can do. And that is quite a lot.