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Mourning the Loss of a Leader

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This message was originally given to a congregation on the Sunday following a vote which dismissed their pastor. The original sermon was given extemporaneously. The text which appears is a transcript taken from the audiotape and edited for print. To protect the identities of those who were involved in these events all names and places have been deleted.

Text: Deuteronomy 34

About three years ago I heard a guest speaker remark that when a speaker comes to a gathering under special circumstances he or she has three choices. The first is to acknowledge the occasion which brings the speaker to that place and to try to do something to address it. The second is to ignore the occasion altogether and do whatever he or she wants to do. The third is to acknowledge the occasion which brings the speaker to that place and then to do her or his own thing and ignore it anyway. When I received the phone call from the chairman of your board last Friday morning I gave a lot of thought to those three options. This morning I believe it is in the best interests and the health of this congregation to choose the first route.

For this reason I wish to state openly to you this morning that I have been friends with members of this congregation on and off for fourteen years. I have known your pastor, your past pastor, for eleven years. For the last three years or so I have been aware of the fact that there have been times of difficulty in this congregation. It is those times of difficulty which have come to completion, as it were, and have brought about this occasion when, on this Sunday morning, the man who has been your pastor for a number of years is not here and I am here

in his place. I recognize that at times like these emotions run deep and emotions are strong. Members of the congregation have feelings toward each other as well as towards themselves concerning the events which have brought this thing to pass. I am not here today to cast judgement. I do not want to be here today to take sides. But I do believe that God's Word has a word for us this morning.

As I prayed and thought about my being here with you today I was reminded of the words which are recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 34 and I would encourage you to open your Bible to this passage. This will not be a deep, as in heavy, scripture lesson this morning. But I want to present you with some possibilities as to what God's Word might be saying to this community of faith in this time of change.

To begin with, however, I would like to acknowledge an unspoken question concerning the relevance of this passage. It is entirely possible that some of you may be thinking, "But that was then and we are us, their circumstances were different from ours. How then can we relate to this Bible story when the circumstances are so different?" To this I say, yes, there are differences which need to be taken into account. Specifically, there are two critical ways in which the circumstances of the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 34 are different from your circumstances as a congregation of people.

The one way in which their circumstances are different, I'm just going to put it out for you to acknowledge it, can be seen in the fact that their leader died. And the leader of your church, however you wish to describe it, is still alive. He may not be here, but he lives in this community. They had a grave, you don't. They would never see Moses again. You, however, may run into your former pastor at the Mall, or on the streets.

The second critical difference between the situation of the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 34 and this congregation today is that Israel had a leader designate. Deuteronomy makes it very clear, and the early chapter of Joshua makes it very clear, that Joshua had already been designated as the next leader of Israel. They knew who was going to lead them next. You as a congregation, however, do not know. There is an uncertainty in that regard. You do not know who your next pastor will be. Those are the two key differences.

There are, however, a number of similarities, four in fact, between their situation and yours. The first and most obvious similarity is the fact that this congregation, as with the experience of Israel in Deuteronomy 34, has experienced the loss of a leader. Someone who was there no longer is. And that is a change.

The second thing which I note from this passage, and I note it especially in verse eight which says that "The sons of Israel wept for Moses" and it speaks of "the weeping and mourning". I notice that there is a sense of communal grief. The people of Israel at the time at which Moses died, as a group of people—not just individuals but as a group of people—experienced communal grief. I haven't had a chance to talk with all of you this morning but I know those I have talked with feel a sense of grief. As I look out on the congregation I can see signs of grief. Some of you are in shock, others are weeping. This is a common experience at times like this. From my knowledge of other congregations who have gone through similar processes I know that there is a sadness which settles in on the entire group of people. This is an important similarity.

Thirdly, I notice by implication that the people of Israel needed a time of healing. It says that "the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days". I would like to suggest that this congregation will also need time for healing.

And the fourth key similarity between the experience of the people of Israel and the experience of this congregation is the fact that the people of Israel had not yet reached the promised land. They needed to move on and do God's will. There is a need in this congregation to move on as well.

Having, therefore, acknowledged these similarities I would like to reflect purposefully on Deuteronomy chapter 34 verse 8 to see what it might say to this congregation as God's people in this time in your life. I would like to explore it a little deeper to discover some additional insights into its message for us.

I would like to begin where the text begins with this phrase "the children of Israel wept for Moses". "The children of Israel", the people, the community, wept for Moses. And that implies in my mind a public acknowledgement of the loss.

Those who study grief and loss note that one of the important aspects of grief and loss is the importance of being open.

People experience loss differently. Some experience it as remorse, others as betrayal, some with deep anguish, and others with deep anger. Some have momentary relief and others settle into shock and don't know what they are even feeling. An important first step for healing for an individual who is in grief is to be able to say I have had a loss and I feel that loss.

When I read Deuteronomy 34:8, and I see that the children of Israel wept for Moses in the Plains of Moab, I see the community of Israel saying to themselves and to each other, "We have had a loss and we feel that loss." There is an openness about the loss.

A few years ago I was at one of our sister churches when their pastor left in the midst of conflict. I remember there came a time when we were able to say, "We have had a loss and we feel that loss." Healthy grief and healthy healing move from anger and pointing of fingers, move from blaming, move from self-critical remorse, move from beating ourselves over the back, move from the shallowness of relief, move from the stunned feelings of shock, and we begin by saying "I hurt because I have lost something." I invite you right now to say that quietly to yourself. You don't have to say it out loud, rather say it to yourself in the pew, quietly, mentally, "We have had a loss in the family and I feel it." (silence)

The second thing that I see in this passage is that the grief was a community experience. I know some of you from other situations. I know that you are a people who are acquainted with family grief. You know that there is a tendency in grief for people to withdraw from other people and become isolated. But when I look at the events recorded in Deuteronomy 34:8 I see that in some way, in some measure, the community was working together to work through this grief experience as a group of people. I have found in my work as a pastor that this is one point where people often stumble. We leave individuals to cope for themselves without support. But even worse, our culture has made people so expendable that organizations sometimes just pick up the pieces and keep on going as if the person who is gone never even existed! Communities of people, like individuals, need to work through their grief. This requires that they work together.

This brings me to the third point which I see in Deuteronomy 34:8, namely, that the people of Israel wept in the plains

of Moab for thirty days. It took them time. They didn't get over it overnight. The loss of Moses was so significant that it took time to adjust to the new reality that he was gone. Remember, Moses had stood up against Pharaoh. Moses had led the people for forty years. Moses had met God face to face on the mountain, and Moses had dared to intercede for the people when God was angry with them. Moses was a powerful leader, and he left a powerfully big hole.

For some people that hole may have left them wondering "What next?" For others it may have seemed like a golden opportunity, "Finally, he's gone!" Remember, Moses was not universally popular. He also had his detractors and people who were upset with him. Yet as I read our text I see that those same people were bound by the same process which took the rest of the people thirty days to mourn as a community. The group together, working together, finding healing together, not by rapidly stepping out and doing some new thing and getting on with it, but finding the roots of healing by being humble and honest with each other.

They waited, they took time, they resisted the temptation to press forward. Canaan waited for them! But they waited to grieve. Joshua waited for them! And they waited to grieve. Those thirty days during which they remained in that place were critical to them as a community. Those thirty days helped them find their identity without Moses. Those who loved him and those who resented him both had to confront the fact that he was no longer a part of their lives. They had decisions to make. Decisions as to where they were going to go in God's name, and what they were going to do in God's name. I urge you as a congregation to be sensitive to each other and to wait on each other during this time of change.

As I look on this verse I am aware of a fourth point which we need to consider. The text says: "They wept for Moses in the plains of Moab." I don't know how familiar you are with the history of the Book of Numbers. But the plains of Moab were not exactly one of the places where Israel had enjoyed success. According to the Book of Numbers the king of Moab became scared when Israel came into the plains of Moab. For this reason, we are told, he tried to recruit a prophet from Assyria named Balaam to come and curse them. While this prophet didn't succeed in cursing Israel, Balaam did tell the

king how he could cause the people of Israel to disobey God and sin. Thus we read how the women of Moab enticed the men of Israel so that they committed fornication with the women of Moab. The plains of Moab were a place of great ambiguity for the people of Israel. It was a place where they had sinned and suffered embarrassment. It was a place where they had struggled with their own sins and many had died.

Yet the plains of Moab were also the place where they grieved the loss of their leader. I find it intriguing that it was in the place where they had sinned that they took the time to grieve Moses' death. I think that this suggests something very significant for us as a people of God, namely, that before God's people can move on we need to be able to stop and pause and consider our own personal history.

Many of you are aware of my connection with one of our sister churches when they went through a process similar to the one you have just gone through. What some of you may not know is that four years ago I was in the same position that your former pastor is in today. I am not going to make any comments about him, rather I want to say something about myself. Part of my personal healing came when I took the time to stop, think and reflect on my own walk with God, my actions, and my place in what had happened. Healing came when, in that place, I sought God's forgiveness, and began to ask "How might I reach out again to others?", including those with whom I had worked. That has been the process which God has brought me through. It began with me on my own "plains of Moab". So I speak to you as one who has been there. I know it is hard. But it is in that place where God's Spirit reaches down to us with the cup of cold water and restores our souls.

Today you feel defeat. Today you feel the burden of the decisions which have been made. There is a certain sense of discomfort that comes when you think too much on the events which have brought you to this place. But it is to the humbled, the disheartened, and the broken that our Lord extends forgiveness, healing and life. Remember it was out of the brokenness which followed Peter's denial of Christ that Jesus called him to feed his lambs.

Simply put, Jesus Christ, the living resurrected Son of God, the Alpha and Omega, is the one who makes old things new

again. I therefore urge you all literally to fix your eyes upon that cross. I urge you to learn from the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and to reflect on what his life, his death, his resurrection, his ministry means to you, and to take the life which he offers as nourishment to your souls.

The final point which I wish to draw from our passage is simply this: the last half of Deuteronomy 34:8 says, "The days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end." Some people are afraid to take the time because they are afraid it will never end. But an end does come. The time comes when the person gets up out of their chair, up on their feet and they say, "Now is the time!" I know that there are concerns in this congregation for healing and getting on. I say to those for whom this is a major concern, "That time will come." You as a congregation will know it. **YOU WILL KNOW IT.** You will know it.