

Unfinished

Chris Currie

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

May 22, 2022 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

In his book *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, Brent Waters writes that ‘On the day of judgment, I think we shall all be surprised by what is taken into account and what is ignored. We will be stunned by what is asked and not asked, by what is condemned and what is commended. We might be dismayed if we are not asked whom we voted for in the extraordinary presidential election of 2020 or what we accomplished after being given tenure [or receiving the big promotion]. We might be astonished to be praised for washing the dishes that evening when our spouse was exhausted and needed some rest.’¹ When think we know what the significant moments of our lives are and we think we know what the significant moments of history are, but Waters whole moment about common callings and ordinary virtues is that he believes God cares more about the mundane than the grand, more about working out the divine purposes in the smallness of life rather than in some spectacular event on a large canvas. Still, it comes as a bit of a shock to learn, as we do here in Deuteronomy 34, that the person who helped lead the Israelites from the Exodus through the painful years of wandering in the wilderness to the precipice of the promised land, does not actually set foot in it. Perhaps even more humiliating, Moses does not cross over, but dies in the land of Moab, just at the threshold of the Promised Land, but is not allowed to cross over and dies in Moab where he is buried and according to Deuteronomy, ‘no one knows his burial place to this day.’ We could easily take this unceremonial ending and apply some outcome metrics to Moses’ life and evaluate goals and objectives and determine that Moses life ended in failure and unfinished disappointment before God. Unable to enjoy the fruits of all his labors, only able to see the promised land from afar, buried in an unmarked grave with no memorial or street sign or monument to commemorate his glory, where is the sense of completion, where is the sense of accomplishment, where is the sense of closure?

On the 500th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth back in 2009, Joe Small wrote that we reluctant to venerate John Calvin and that is exactly the way Calvin wanted it. ‘Calvin did not want the reverence of future generations. Among other safeguards against idolization, he specified that he be buried in Geneva’s common cemetery in an unmarked grave,’ and that is precisely where he was laid to rest, just like his forebear Moses.² His life was used and used up in service to God and for the well-being of his neighbor, so no need to direct our adoration to the grave marker rather than toward the Author of our

¹ Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues: Christian Ethics for Everyday Life*, 35.

² Joe Small, *Calvin’s Jubilee’ in The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 24, 2008.

life and faith. Not unlike the prayer written by Father Untener bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, that has been put to use to commemorate the life of slain archbishop Oscar Romero. It begins by reminding us that 'we accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.'

I know that prayer was written upon the death of Bishop Romero in his memory, but it could also serve as an epitaph at Moses' burial site if we knew where it was. Even, as Deuteronomy tells us, never has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face,' Moses' life does not end fully fulfilled in the Promises Land, but in a place where he may never get to see the end results.

If you have ever had the opportunity to walk in the mystic darkness of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris or York Minster or Chartres or Cologne or Durham or Salisbury, you are standing in the majesty of a structure that took, in some cases 2-3 hundred years to complete. These majestic cathedrals were not just one person or generation's life's work, but generation after generation, decade after decade, century after century. Imagine being a stonemason for the crypt or some corner edifice and knowing, even if you started as an apprentice at the age of 12 and lived three times the life expectancy of the average person in the middle ages, there was absolutely no chance you would ever see the cathedral completed in your lifetime and most likely not your grandchildren's lifetime either. In the midst of the pandemic in 2020, the Sagrada Familia, the famously unfinished cathedral designed by architect, Antoni Gaudi, announced another delay but also a final completion date set for 2026, the 100th anniversary of Gaudi's death. The cathedral was begun more than 130 years ago. In a piece in Time magazine from July 2020 announcing the new completion date, the author warned that making the deadline will only happen if 'technical complications, theological doubts, and several blocks' worth of outraged residents' are overcome.³ I don't know exactly what the theological doubts are, but I kind

³ Lisa Abend, *Time Magazine* (July 8, 2020), International Issue.

of hope they never fully complete the cathedral. I think that would be a more profound theological statement that bringing the project to completion. None of us are fully finished, even edifices that have been undergoing construction for the last 130 years, and being a disciple of Jesus Christ does not mean we should only be planting seeds that we ourselves will get to enjoy and see bear fruit. That is what can make life in Christian community frustrating at times...our organizational charts look more like a London Subway map than like a orderly procession. Our anticipated outcomes are very difficult to assess and are lifelong projects not things that can be measured in a span of a month or even a year. We don't send home report cards...for our young people or our older people. And the ways we define success are go completely against the grain of a world lives moment to moment on immediate gratification and a neuron stimulation from a post on Twitter. To see ourselves as unfinished and incomplete are not things we should be embarrassed by but rather badges of honor. Perhaps most famously, Mark's gospel ends in chapter 16 not with beautiful denouement and tying up of loose ends, but rather it ends with an announcement of the resurrection and a bunch of fearful and uncertain disciples unsure what is going to happen next. Mark's first ending concludes with this cliffhanger: 'so they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' That sounds about right. A community of unfinished disciples making their way forward, waiting to see where God will lead, clinging to one another for dear life, and realizing that they are incomplete and unfinished products with a lot of work left to do and miles to go before they sleep.

Many years ago the Scottish theologian Alan Lewis began a book on the 'theology of Holy Saturday' which would be published after his death in 2001. The work was begun nearly two decades before and while his study of suffering death was underway, he himself was diagnosed with cancer and continued to write in fits and starts and continue working on his book. Though he wanted to live long enough to complete the book and see it into print, he died before seeing the work in print. In the foreword to the book written by his wife and son, they write that until his death, Alan Lewis 'continued to work on and revise the text until shortly before his death,' and that 'he considered the book to be his life's work,' even if he himself never saw his life's work fully finished, fully complete.⁴ One of the most striking and overwhelming facades to a cathedral is Wells cathedral in southwest England not far from Bath and Bristol. The western face of Wells cathedral is a beautiful stone façade of holy figures, saints, and spiritual leaders in the life of Christianity and it is really magnificent to look at even in its imposing and austere grayish brown stone rising high above everyone and everything. What is interesting is that archaeological and historical study of Wells Cathedral and many other cathedrals

⁴ Alan Lewis, *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Preface, xii.

has revealed that far from being ancient monolithic gray-ish brown structures in their own time, these cathedrals were painted vibrant colors reflecting an even more beautiful, elaborate, and welcome sight to the world around them. Using historical study and modern technology, some have even been redecorated with lighting and computer design to reflect what they would have looked like in their complete and finished form. And so may we be in our complete and finished form. Until then, may we find purpose in all the ways our work is unfinished and in all the ways our lives are incomplete, trusting joyfully and hopefully that our life's work may not find its fullest form long after we are gone.