

## TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

### Deuteronomy 34:1-12

I have been going through a lot of my stuff for our move overseas in the last few months. In some files I had not looked at for a long time, I came across my old notes from my PhD work. You know, the kind of stuff you think you will never use again? Well, I came across my notes on *Michel de Certeau*, a French Jesuit who died in 1986. His insights into the Christian condition and the often evoked “decline of the Christian West” were as trenchant forty years ago as they are today.

For *de Certeau*, the heart of the Christian faith was the empty tomb and the angel’s words: “He is not here. He has gone to Galilee.” Like Mary, he opines, we are sent into the world to look for Jesus—not amongst the dead but the living.

I really like what *de Certeau* has to say because “searching for Jesus in the world” has been a defining characteristic of the Christian church since its inception. The church has always been able to adapt to the culture around it. That’s how the church has survived now for two millennia. This should be self-evident. The church in China looks different than the one in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South or North America. This means that no church has the corner market on “defining” what it means to be “Christian,” no matter how much people might want to tell us they do.

Looking forward toward what lies ahead and not looking back too much to what once was has always been one of the hallmarks of God’s people in relationship with God. And whenever God’s people linger too much looking back over their shoulders, fixing their gaze on what’s left behind, things usually don’t go well for them. Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt for disobeying God’s command to look ahead is a stark reminder of this.

A faithful role model for a life lived by looking ahead, not back, is Moses, the greatest prophet Israel ever had, as scripture says. Moses stood up to Pharaoh. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, out of their bondage of slavery. Moses led them for forty years through the wilderness in search of the promised land. When he finally sees it on the horizon, God stops him cold in his tracks and delivers this news: “This is the land which I promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Take a good long look—because you are not going to get there.” And Moses dies “at the LORD’s command,” and is buried in a place nobody remembers.

What on earth is wrong with Moses, I wonder? If it had been me, I’d have a few choice words for God. Words like, “Hey God, what’s up with this? You have got to be kidding me. I did everything you wanted me to do. I left my birthplace in Egypt and my cushy life there. I risked my neck getting killed by the people who raised me and freed a bunch of slaves, who were once Egypt’s economic backbone. I put up with your people hemming,

hawing, and whining constantly while I dragged them through the wilderness. And now that we're there, now that we can finally see the promised land and can almost taste its milk and honey, you tell me I can't go? You're dangling this carrot in front of me, and then you say No?" Well, obviously I am not Moses.

What is remarkable to me, what is so counter-cultural to our own moment in history, is that Moses took God's "no you can't go" for an answer. Moses would have a hard time today because he does not raise his voice. He does not argue. He does not pose for the historical record or an indelible Instagram moment. He does not pitch a hissy-fit or throw a major pity-party until he gets his way. Instead, he looks at the promised land from afar and he dies. Just like that. I'd like to think that Moses died on the spot with a smile on his face because he understood right then and there that he had finished what God had called him to do. And because right then and there he understood that God does not renege on God's promises.

To me, this is a rather refreshing story. It also reminds me of another significant leader of God's people, John Calvin. Before the end of his life, Calvin made provisions to be buried in an unmarked grave when his work was done. And he was. I always wondered if Moses was his role model when he made this decision. Moses and John Calvin also remind me of all the unsung saints who have preceded you and me in our own calling and who have died without any recognition for their faithfulness whatsoever. All of them understood that before it is our story, it is God's story. We just happen to be part of it for a time. And long after we are gone, it will still be God's story.

"Permanence," *Michel de Certeau* says, "was never our calling." I love this phrase because it is so true. Not striving for permanence but being faithful and living according to God's claim on our lives—that's our calling. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* formulated it this way: "When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die." All of this is merely a reiteration of what Jesus said long ago: "No one has

greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13)." Moses laid down his life for the people of Israel. Calvin laid down his life for God's people in Geneva. Many of our foremothers and forefathers laid down their lives for their families and friends. All of them took God's "No" for an answer when their time had come.

I think these are words we need to hear and actions we need to follow, especially today. In a world, in a country, in a church, and perhaps in our own lives—as we are struggling to find our way forward—it is refreshing to be reminded: "Permanence was never our calling." And to hear the difficult and challenging words of Jesus: "If you want to be the church, if you want to be my disciples, you need to lay down your life for your friends." Moses did not get to negotiate about this, and neither do we.

Looking for Jesus in the empty tomb was just as futile for the disciples then as it is for us now. I believe our spiritual ancestors of the Reformed tradition understood the angel's command in a

profound way. They knew that looking back over their shoulders for too long would only turn them into pillars of salt. They knew the church was reformed and always in the process of being reformed according to God's word in their own time. They always looked for Jesus among the living and not among the dead.

Why not join them?

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