Sunday, October 23, 2005
INNER VISION AND OUTER VISION
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-40

As I grow older, one thing I appreciate more and more about the Bible is that its stories have no prejudice against older people. Instead, the longer-living are celebrated. Abraham and Sarah were an old couple when they had their first child and their second.

Furthermore, when they were much older than most people then and now, they were not afraid to pull up stakes and move to a new country. The heroes and heroines in many Bible stories accomplish the most in the later years of their lives. That's good news for all of us.

Moses is a prime example. According to tradition, during his youth, he lived as an Egyptian prince, pampered and privileged in Pharaoh's house. In mid-life, he worked hard tending sheep, raising a family, and being a member of a busy community. Not until he had appropriately aged and matured did God call Moses into his most active service. In the third stage of his life, he became a servant of God unlike few others.

In the passage read today from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is described as he is nearing the end of his life: "Moses was 120 years old when he died. His sight was unimpaired, and his vigor had not abated" (Deuteronomy 34:7). A modern translation would be: "Moses didn't need glasses, contact lenses, cataract surgery, nor Viagra." But there's a deeper meaning to this statement. Much of the language of the Bible is metaphorical, so this description of Moses is saying that even though he was very old in years, his vision for the future was still optimistic and his energy for life remained strong. He was old in years but not in spirit. He had inner vision and outer vision.

Not too many years ago, there was a popular saying, "Never trust anyone over thirty." You don't hear that statement as much today. Maybe that's because the fastest-growing segment of the population is made up of people over 65. In this country especially, human beings are living longer. In less than one century, there has been an astonishing 50% increase in longevity. Centenarians (individuals living to be 100) are found everywhere.

We're discovering that we need new institutions for the longer-living. Assisted living apartments, senior centers, adult day-care facilities, and other services to meet the needs of longer-living people are found everywhere. In the little town where I grew up many years ago, there was only one institution for older people. It was a nursing home with the unfortunate name "Sunset Nursing Home." Now, that little town has many different types of institutions for the longer-living.

There are also negative aspects to longer living, both physically and mentally. As you live longer, you worry more about high blood pressure, failing eyesight, cancer, memory loss, hearing loss, and the decline of physical stamina.

But as more is learned about taking care of your physical and mental health, there's also positive news. In the book The Myth of the First Three Years, John T. Bruer demonstrates that some of the most exciting discoveries in neuroscience show the brain continues to develop throughout life and that brain structure is continually affected by experience. Neuroscientists once believed that lost neurons could not regenerate, but now it turns out that sometimes they can. "The brain is not 'cooked' by age 3 or 10," according to this research. Our brains remain

remarkably plastic, and we retain the ability to learn throughout our lives. In other words, you can teach an old dog new tricks.

This was true of Moses, according to the Bible story. His life, his positive vision of the future, his leadership, and his growing faith and understanding of God all tell you that, like Moses, many good gifts can be yours as you grow older. This is especially true if you have an abiding and growing faith in God.

In his book The Gifts of the Jews, Thomas Cahill argues that one of the most unique and precious gifts of the Jews to succeeding generations is their belief that, with the guidance of God, tomorrow can be better than today. As he traces the developing faith in God demonstrated in the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, Amos, Isaiah, Naomi, Ruth, and others, the growing concept of an unknown future that can be better than the past and present takes hold, and western civilization is born.

From this insight, the Jews evolved a new vision of men and women with unique destinies — a vision that thousands of years later inspired the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today. This is the basis for all educational systems and scientific research.

This was the vision of the future that inspired Jesus to speak of the Kingdom of God being in our midst and continuing into the future. It is the foundation of the church today. It's what inspired leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "I Have a Dream" speech. He knew the story of Moses and his inner vision.

Here's part of what Martin Luther King, Jr. said in that speech to the crowds gathered in Washington, D.C. in 1963: "Go back to Mississippi. Go back to Alabama. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair."

"In spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Five years later, in another speech in 1968, not long before he was killed, he recalled the story from Deuteronomy you heard in our scripture reading, where Moses is allowed to see the Promised Land but not enter it. Dr. King spoke of being on a mountain and seeing the Promised Land of the future as he envisioned it.

Prior to the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and later Jesus of Nazareth, most human beings saw life primarily as part of an endless cycle of birth and death. They had no vision of the future as being any better than the past or present. Time was perceived as a wheel, spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. Tomorrow would be the same as today.

Cyclical religion goes nowhere because within its way of seeing the world, there is no future as we have come to understand it — only the next revolution of the wheel. Human beings are destined to remain in the same rut forever. It's the philosophical basis of the caste system and other forms of slavery.

You can have good inner vision, no matter what your age. You can have the vision of Moses, Abraham, Sarah, and Jesus, where you see the future with hope. No matter what your age, you can begin by replacing the picture which wants to portray life only as a wheel that turns endlessly with no progress possible.

As you grow older, if you want to keep your inner vision unimpaired, you need to replace another view of life, especially your personal life, that sees it as a graph that goes up and up to some imaginary point and then goes down and down to the bitter end. What you can learn from Moses and others in the Biblical tradition is that life need not be seen in this way.

Many of you have read the best-selling book Tuesdays with Morrie. In spite of having “Lou Gehrig’s disease,” Morrie contributes, he teaches, and he has a positive inner vision of the future. Like Moses, he can see the Promised Land. Therefore, his love of life, like that of Moses, is unabated until the moment he dies.

The story of Moses tells you that life can be filled with creative power and adventure until your last breath. As his life is nearing its end, God leads him to the top of Mount Nebo, shows him the Promised Land, and tells him that he will not live long enough to enter it. All he can do is see it. For Moses, that is enough. He now knows that all his work was not in vain, and he can die in peace.

Jesus faced his death in the same way. As he was dying on the cross, he knew his work had not been in vain. He was certain that his most basic message—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself"—would continue to inspire human beings to work toward building a better world for all people.

This can be true for you. You can never live in all the Promised Lands of the future because no one is immortal. But if you keep your spiritual and mental life growing and expanding, if your inner vision remains unimpaired and your love of life is not abated, you will be able to see many of the Promised Lands, and you will know that your struggles have not been in vain.

The story of Moses reminds you that life need not reach a peak and then decline. It underscores the fact that even though your physical stamina may decrease, there is no limit to your continued mental and spiritual growth. In fact, I believe that you are more conducive to this kind of growth as you grow older. The choice, however, is up to you. This kind of growing is not automatic.

A friend of mine in her late 60s was attending an educational conference for her own benefit when a younger woman in her 30s asked her, “What are you doing in this seminar? You’re so much older than the rest of us.” Periodically during the meeting, the younger woman continued to ask the same question in different ways. My friend’s reply was always the same: “I want to keep learning and growing.”

This younger person had not considered that you could keep learning and growing at any age. Later in the meeting, she asked my friend, “Do people of your age have fun anymore?” It became apparent that the younger woman was afraid of growing older, a fear she continued to reveal during the seminar with her questions.

A fear of aging is present in this culture. I experience it personally at times. Society often looks upon older age as a kind of shameful secret. But what is old age? Who can precisely define it?

Whether or not you act as if your life has reached its peak and is now going downhill depends on how you act or react to what happens to you as you grow older.

Here is an individual who realizes that he has taken the wrong road in life. Gifted artistically, under the pressure of family and for security, he chose a safe career. Now he's bored, feels guilty and limited, and yet feels it is too late to make a change. Because he did not follow his inner vision, he acts as if life is almost over. But it need not be.

Here is another person who realizes that she may not attain a goal she always had. She is on a plateau in her life, and from where she is, it looks as if the rest of her life is all downhill. She feels old and acts that way. But it need not be.

You can feel old prematurely if you do not know how to accept and learn from failure. If you live so that your whole life's value is tied to attaining one particular goal or event, and if that fails, you tend to judge your life as a failure. But it need not be.

On the other hand, there are those to whom prosperity or success brings on a kind of premature and false old age. I see people who cave in the moment they achieve the goal they had set for themselves and then act as if life is over. When an individual stops thinking, stops searching for new interests, becomes inflexible, then your inner vision is impaired, and you are already old no matter what your chronological age.

Here's what you can learn from Moses. No matter what your age, do not let your inner vision become impaired. Have a positive vision for the future. You may not realize all your dreams in your lifetime, but keep on dreaming. Above all, remember to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Also, remember, life does not have to be perfect to be good. Amen.