

October 29, Ordinary 30A (Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

The nature of God's judgment is not entirely clear. What has Moses done wrong?

by [Kerry Hasler-Brooks](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue

I just returned home from a visit to my grandmother. Every visit seems like it might be my last. She is almost 97 but still lives by herself in a small New Hampshire town that averages 103 inches of snow each year. She has begrudgingly stopped mowing her own lawn, shoveling her front steps, and using a woodstove to heat her house. She has survived advanced skin cancer and reconstructive surgery, several ministrokes, a serious car accident, falls leading to broken bones, and, most devastating, the death of her husband and two children and the advancing dementia of another child.

As I read the story of Moses' final moments and death, I see my grandmother.

The story is linked to the final stage of the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Moses climbs Mount Nebo and sees, for the first time, the land promised by God. God is with him, showing him the land, the end of the wanderings, the material promise of the Israelites' covenant with God. But this is as close as Moses will ever get to the promised land: "I have let you see it with your eyes," says God, "but you will not cross over into it."

Moses (along with Aaron) was barred from the promised land back in Numbers 20 when he, at God's instruction, brought water from a rock so that the Israelites could survive in the desert. The nature of God's judgment is not entirely clear. What has Moses done wrong? Struck the rock rather than speak to it? Approached the people in anger and judgment? Failed to make God's holiness clear to the people? Spoken and acted out of sequence? Is God's judgment even tied to this moment with the rock at all? Is it instead tied to the earlier incidents with the golden calf and the spies? Or to the people's faithlessness rather than Moses'?

It's not clear. But it is tempting to read this story in terms of punishment of some kind, in terms of God's anger and Moses' separation from the people who will enter the land promised by God.

The description in Deuteronomy, however, emphasizes Moses' remarkable life as a servant and child of God rather than his failures. Moses is remembered as a unique prophet and an extraordinary man of God. This extraordinariness is not limited to Moses' relational or spiritual strength but extends even to his body, which is described as perfect at age 120. Upon his death, God buries Moses in a secret place, continuing in death the unique intimacy between God and this man who God knew "face to face." While most commentators understand this burial as a way to protect Israel from their own inclinations to idolatry, to hide away the body they would be inevitably inclined to worship, it is also true that burial at God's hand is unique in the biblical story. In this passage, Moses is not allowed into the promised land, but he is still set apart as the most faithful and powerful of God's people. He is remarkable.

As I reread the passage right now, however, with my grandmother's body, face, and voice still so close to me, it is the *unremarkable* qualities of Moses' end of life that are most striking to me. Moses, like all of us, is mortal. Death is one of the few things we can predict about life, one of the few things that we hold in common across time, place, culture, and identity. As Jonathan Sacks writes, "The fact that Moses was not destined to enter the promised land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality."

Unlike Moses, my grandmother has weak eyesight. She gave up knitting and cooking long ago, and she struggles to read even the largest-print books available, only getting a taste now and then of a once favorite pastime. Her speech is slow and slurred, indecipherable at times, as a result of the recent stroke that led to her latest fall—though she happily talks and talks, as social as ever, and laughs her way through every request to repeat herself.

My grandmother's body is frail, her skin soft and thin, her balance inconsistent. She is nearly dependent on a walker, which she utterly despises. Her mind is sharp and engaged, but there are brief confusions. A few days ago she thought, just for a moment, that my mother was her late husband who died more than 30 years ago. The mistake was lovely, a waking version of a beautiful dream she'd been having, but it was also startling and scary.

Unlike Moses, my grandmother's faith is not public or radical or "mighty" or "awesome."

And yet, her end of life is as remarkable as Moses' was. Every life, every death is sacred and worthy of our attention, our joy, our grief—for no one is replaceable, whether they have an extraordinary legacy or the most ordinary story.