

Living Our Parts Well – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

As most of you know, Matt Zahniser's father Howard Zahniser spent much of his career writing, lobbying, and testifying on behalf of the Wilderness Act. But did you know that Howard Zahniser died just four months before President Lyndon Johnson signed that bill into law on September 3rd of 1964?

Stories like this tend to unsettle us. The stories most of us like the best end with the hero, after having struggled against insurmountable odds, somehow surviving and attaining her or his goal. Think about it. Would we still love the *Chronicles of Narnia* if Aslan didn't triumph? Would we still love *Star Wars* if Luke Skywalker lost? What if Frodo failed in his quest and the Dark Lord Sauron wasn't destroyed when Gollum and the ring fell into the fires of Mt. Doom? What if Harry, Ron, and Hermione weren't able to destroy all Voldemort's horcruxes? And what about our newest incarnation of Sherlock Holmes—what if Benedict Cumberbatch hadn't come back for his third season on PBS and had actually been outmaneuvered by Moriarty? Would we still love these stories as much as we do? Would we be satisfied—or just frustrated?

This fall I've been teaching dystopian fiction and film in my COR 101 freshmen seminar at Greenville College. The first half of the semester has taught me that the majority of the students in my class prefer stories in which the protagonist reaches his or her goal and triumphs in the end. When the story ends with the hero falling short, the students moan and complain about the ending. They don't like it. It's not a "good" story. I don't think my students are any different than most of us. I think they reflect our human nature. We long for heroes who get what they seek because we long to get what we seek ourselves. Because they want their heroes to triumph, two of the dystopian films I chose for my students to watch this fall have been particularly frustrating to them—*Children of Men* and *Snowpiercer*. I recommend both of these films to you if you haven't already seen them, that is if you can handle a heavy dose of violence and profanity. (I should probably pause in my sermon at this point to give you a spoiler alert because I'm going to talk specifically about the ending of *Snowpiercer*. If you want to see it but haven't yet, feel free to check on your child in the nursery or use the restroom now.)

Set on earth after an environmental disaster has left it frozen and uninhabitable, *Snowpiercer* takes place on board a high-speed train that circles the earth completely every year and protects the people inside from the outside environment. The train is divided by social class so that the poorest remain in the back, while people with money and power live in the front. The protagonist of *Snowpiercer*, Curtis, has lived in the last car of the train with the rest of the low-class survivors for seventeen years. Haunted by desperate and selfish choices he made early in his life on the train, Curtis doesn't think himself worthy of being a leader even though his peers want that from him. Finally fed up with the unjust treatment and abuse they endure, Curtis spearheads a rebellion that takes a small band of last-car inhabitants through battles in car after car of the train

heading toward the front. While others in their group are satisfied with making it to the middle of the train, Curtis sets his sights on the engine where Wilford, the creator and God-head of the train, resides. When Curtis finally makes it to the engine and confronts Wilford, he discovers that the engine will not bring them salvation. Their hope lies outside the train rather than inside it. In the end, Curtis dies while shielding a young woman and child from the explosion that tears the train apart, and these two survivors head out into the pure white snow-covered terrain.

Most of the time when our fictional heroes don't reach their goals (or at least their goals as we define them) we are left wanting. We sit in our seats frustrated, holding the book hoping there will be a sequel or staring at the screen until the last credit has passed, saying "no, that can't be the end," waiting for a "good" ending, an ending where our hero's good efforts are justly rewarded.

That's how my students felt about *Snowpiercer*. Because Curtis died in the end rather than gaining freedom for himself and the other back-car inhabitants, it seems as if he didn't reach his goal. But Curtis proved to be an extraordinary leader; he became a "Moses" to his people, leading them out of the bondage of the back car all the way to the front of the train. I would argue that despite his death, or perhaps because of it, Curtis did achieve his goal. Curtis dies, but the two young survivors journey out into a snowy wilderness to continue the story. *Snowpiercer* isn't really Curtis' story. Ultimately *Snowpiercer* is the story of the survival of the whole human race, and Curtis is just one part of that story.

Most of us probably feel some of the same frustrations as my students when we read our Old Testament lesson for today. Deuteronomy chapter 34, the final chapter in the book of Deuteronomy, celebrates Moses' life and legacy, all 120 years of it, but it also chronicles his death—a death that leaves Moses within sight of his goal, but not able to "cross over" the Jordan River to reach it. Our passage reminds us what an amazing life Moses led. He was a great prophet "whom the Lord knew face to face." The writers who gave us Deuteronomy praise Moses for the "signs and wonders" that God sent him to perform against Pharaoh in Egypt and for his "mighty deeds" and "terrifying displays of power" that the Israelites witnessed. The passage ranks Moses as the greatest prophet. Whether or not they realized it every moment throughout their journey, Moses was the Israelites' hero. He devoted decades to helping them reach the goal God had promised them. But Deuteronomy 34 also acknowledges the tragedy of Moses' story. Moses died before he reached his goal. If any prophet of God deserved to make it to the land to which God had been leading the Israelites, wasn't Moses the one? Yet as God had foretold, Moses was only allowed to "set his eyes" on the Israelites' "land of promise," not his feet. Instead of leading the Israelites across the Jordan River from the Transjordan, Moses was only able to stand at the top of the mountain and look down on it. He wasn't ever allowed to "cross over" and plant his feet on that "hallowed" land he had been leading the Israelites toward for decades even though it was within his reach.

Can you imagine how frustrated Moses might have been to be so close to his goal and have God not let him go further? To be able to look out across the "whole land" as the

passage says with its plains, valleys, and desert and know that he who had been God's chosen leader would never touch it?

Interestingly, Moses' frustration isn't a part of the story that was recorded in Deuteronomy 34. Moses' voice isn't even heard in this chapter. We hear only the voices of the narrator and the Lord, because Moses isn't the hero of this story. God is. The story of Israel's flight out of Egypt and wandering in the wilderness to get to the "land of promise" is God's story. It's not the story of Moses' remarkable leadership qualities. It's the story of God's faithful leading. It's the story of God's continued grace toward a people, including Moses, who were bent toward sin.

The verses we read together from Psalm 90 this morning remind us of why it's important that this isn't Moses' story. In the Psalter, Psalm 90 is labeled "A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God." Let's look again at the first six verses of Psalm 90 that we read together, and as I read them to you, let's imagine that Moses is speaking these words as he stands on the mountaintop opposite Jericho looking out over Canaan:

90:1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

90:2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

90:3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

90:4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. [A "watch," I learned, is one-third of the night.]

90:5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

90:6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

If we put the words of this psalm on Moses' lips as the Psalter does, then it makes sense that Moses is silent at the end of his story. Moses recognizes that God has been his and his ancestors' "dwelling place" for generations before them, and God will continue to be the "dwelling" of generations to come after them. Like Moses, all of God's servants come and go in the same way that the grass "flourishes" in the morning and "withers" at night.

The story of God through the Israelites doesn't die with Moses. After they mourned Moses for the designated thirty-day period, the baton of leadership passed to Joshua who "was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him." And Moses assumes his position in the line of distinguished patriarchs who have moved in and out of the history of the people of Israel. Moses has fulfilled his purpose in God's story. While his life has certainly been magnificent, it was not Moses but Joshua who would lead Israel into Canaan. And it was God, not Moses or Joshua, who was Israel's source of

stability.

The story of Moses teaches us the same lesson that Paul demonstrates in our I Thessalonians passage and that Jesus presents in Matthew 22. When the Pharisees ask him which “law is the greatest,” Jesus replies with two: “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.” For Jesus those two commandments were inseparable. Jesus could not love God his father without loving the disciples, the poor, the sick, even the Pharisees. But the reverse is true as well. Jesus could not love the people around him without loving God at the same time. Moses could not love God without loving the Israelites. And by loving the Israelites Moses also loved God. Paul could not love God without loving the Thessalonians. Neither could Paul truly love the Thessalonians without also loving God. We cannot separate loving God from loving our neighbor or loving our neighbor from loving God. I’m not even sure which one happens first. To do one is to do the other.

Fifty years ago this year President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into Law. That law set aside as “forever wild” 54 federal Wilderness Areas in thirteen states, totaling just over nine million acres. Howard Zahniser left a legacy that has been and will continue to be enjoyed by generations. We will be forever grateful to him for the part he played in making that happen. But thankfully the story didn’t end with Howard. Just as Moses passed the baton to Joshua, others have taken up the work of protecting wilderness in the United States. Thanks to Howard and to those who have followed him the national wilderness system now encompasses 109 million acres in 750 areas. That seems like a tremendous amount of land, but according to the Wilderness Society, it’s still less than five percent of the total U.S. land base, and when you factor out Alaskan wilderness, it’s just two percent of the land in the lower 48 states. I pray that devoted protagonists like Howard Zahniser will continue to add chapters and acres to the Wilderness story and to God’s story.

God’s story didn’t begin and end with Moses or Joshua or Paul or even Jesus. And it doesn’t begin and end with us. My silhouette, like many of yours, is painted into the mural in the narthex. Even though most of the time I can’t find it in the midst of all the vines that have grown over and around it, I still know it’s there. I still know that I’m a part of God’s story at St. Paul’s, and you are, too, even if your silhouette wasn’t ever traced on the wall.

Our scripture lessons for today remind us that we all play small yet significant parts in God’s much greater story of love, and that our job as the protagonist in our part of the story is to be the best lovers of God and our neighbors that we can be. Thanks be to God that the story doesn’t rely solely on any of us. Just as Moses passed the role of leading the Israelites on to Joshua and others took up the Wilderness story that Howard Zahniser helped pioneer, we too will pass our part of the story on to those who come after us. May God grant us the wisdom and the perseverance to love well throughout our whole part of the story.