

“Missing Out”
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 15, 2023
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

As you heard during the announcements at the start of worship this morning, our Heritage Lecture speaker this year is Dr. Kate Bowler. Dr. Bowler will speak here in the sanctuary this Thursday evening, January 19, at 7p. And in preparation for her visit, both last Sunday and today, I am taking an idea from one of Dr. Bowler’s bestselling books, and preaching about that idea.

This morning...the idea is missing out.

Missing out—do you know what it’s like to miss out on something?

I suspect you do.
We all do.

For example...

It’s been a while since I told you a story about my beloved baseball team, the NY Yankees...and I can see from the looks on your faces, you feel like you’ve been missing out.

So let me share another one with you.

When I was growing up in the 1980’s, there was this long stretch where the Yankees never won a World Series.

18 straight years, they did not win, and my friends in Michigan got to celebrate the Detroit Tigers winning the World Series in 1984.

But with my Yankees...I got NOTHING!

I can just FEEL the sympathy oozing out from all of you.

Well, shortly after college, I made my FIRST TRIP to Yankee Stadium.

I went with two friends, and we sat in the bleachers through a miserable game. Two rain delays, we were getting soaked, and the Yankees were losing. Finally, in the bottom of the 8th inning, one of my friends suggested that we leave. After all, the Red Sox were ahead 4-1. The game was virtually over.

When we got back to my friend's apartment, his wife came running to the door.

“Oh, you guys are so lucky! What a game. Can you believe that game?”

Mystified, we asked her what she was talking about.

Turns out that when the Yankees were down to their final out—which was a pop up to the third baseman, looked like the Red Sox would win—a FAN JUMPED ON THE FIELD!

The umpire called fan interference.

Replay that last pitch.

Which they did, only this time there was a hit, and another hit, and then another hit...

And then, my childhood hero, DON MATTINGLY, comes to the plate, and knocks in the game-winning run, and the stadium goes CRAZY, Yankees win, Yankees win!!

And I got to watch it all...not in the stadium where I had a ticket, but on the replay on tv, because I had left too soon.

Still waiting for the sympathy here...

Do you what it's like to miss out on something?
Something that is, perhaps, not as trivial as the end of a baseball game?

I raise the topic today because of a scene that Kate Bowler describes in her book, *No Cure For Being Human*. In that book, Dr. Bowler devotes a chapter to the idea of creating a bucket list—that is, a list of things we want to do or accomplish before we die.

After her stage IV cancer diagnosis in her 30s, Dr. Bowler was encouraged by one of the counselors in the cancer clinic to create such a list.

She resisted doing so, however.

She writes:

“The problem with aspirational lists...is that they often skip the point entirely. Instead of helping us grapple with our finitude, they have approximated infinity.”

They teach us that:

“With unlimited time and resources, we could do anything, be anyone....with the right list, we would never starve with the hunger of want.”

“But I want things,” she goes on to say.

Before being diagnosed with cancer—

“I had wanted two kids.
 I had wanted to travel the world.
 I had wanted to be the one to hold my mother’s hand at the
 end.”¹

And now, her future—is more up in the air.
 In other words, she’s grappling with the subject of **missing out**.

This is what I appreciate so much what Kate Bowler does in her books. She asks questions that most of us have, and she does so in honest ways, direct ways, and she resists the temptation to provide easy answers:

When the limitations of life come our way...
 When the losses of life take our breath away...

How do we remain faithful to God when a dream that we’ve harbored does not come to pass, or when our future does not look like the one we thought it would be, when we feel like we’re the one who is missing out?

Of course, these are not new questions.
 They are old questions, and they show up in the Bible.

Just take our Old Testament text from Deuteronomy for today.

Chapter 34 of Deuteronomy describes the end of the life of Moses. God takes Moses up to Mount Nebo, and “the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and

¹ Kate Bowler, *No Cure For Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)*, New York: Random House, 2021.

Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain...”

And God said to Moses, “This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob...”

In other words, Moses is the FIRST to see the Promised Land.
Of course he’s the first to see it.

For 40 years, Moses has been toiling in the wilderness to help his people reach this land.

Moses has been coaxing the people,
berating the people,
leading the people,
taking care of the people...

And finally, when Moses and the Israelites get close to the Promised Land, what does God say to Moses?

Does God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Go relax, put your feet up...time to retire in the land that I have promised...”??

No.

God says to Moses:

“I have let you see [this land] with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Wait...what?!

Moses does not get to enter the Promised Land?

Look, Moses was the one who confronted Pharaoh.

Moses was the one who parted the Red Sea.

Moses was the one who kept God from destroying the Israelites when they worshipped the golden calf.

The author of Deuteronomy writes:

“Never...has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled...”

Unequaled.
No one like Moses.

And now, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness with a stubborn and stiff-necked people, Moses’ reward—
is to die with the Promised Land in his sights—
but just out of reach??

How do you think Moses felt...about missing out?

The Bible doesn’t tell us, but maybe Moses was mad about it.
Maybe he got a little ticked off that God would let it all work out that way.

I hope you know that there are plenty of times in life when it’s a perfectly faithful thing to get angry at God, that God would let things happen the way they do.

I’m thinking about three years ago, when the pandemic hit, and high school seniors did not get the end of the year that they were hoping for.

Or when those same seniors became freshman in college that fall, only their freshman year looked nothing like college was supposed to look like that year.

When you're robbed of something, it's perfectly fine to shake one's fist at God and say, "How come? Why did you let this happen to me?"

Maybe that's where Moses was when God told him he would not enter the Promised Land.

Or maybe not.

You know, there are times when I run into people or hear about people who have every reason to be bitter with God, to shake their fist at the Almighty...but that's not what they're doing.

A number of years ago, I was serving on a Presbytery committee with an older gentleman. I asked him what church he belonged to in the Presbytery, and he told me.

"But it wasn't my first church in the Presbytery," he said.

"The church my wife and I used to belong to—well, we had to close our doors. We were in our 60's at the time, and we were the second youngest couple attending worship. We didn't want to do it, but we had to do it. It was time to close."

And then his eyes got a little teary.

"My children were baptized in that church. My friends were buried in that church. I pictured spending the rest of my life worshipping where I had worshipped for 40 years. I wanted my funeral to be held in that church."

"And now we're members someplace else, and there's a group of us from that old congregation that go to this other church...we all sit together in the same two rows of pews.

“Those are now our seats! We claim them as our seats!
“We probably shouldn’t do that—but we do it anyway!”

And then he said something I’ve never forgotten.

“At this point, I’m just trying to be faithful in the place where God has planted me.”

Those words have always stuck with me.

Do you know what that’s like?

To go from MISSING OUT...to being faithful in the place where God has planted you?

The recently retired President of Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes, tells of meeting with a young couple named Mike and Sue for pre-marital counseling early in his career.

When they showed up for their last meeting, Barnes was thinking that they had covered the necessary ground and all that was left was to plan the wedding itself.

But as they began, Mike blurts out, “I have to say that I’m terrified.”

This got Sue’s attention real fast, and her eyes started welling up with tears.

So Mike said, “Oh, baby, I am not afraid of marrying you. I am afraid of losing you. My mother died when I was a teenager, and I love you more than her. What I fear is losing you.”

Barnes writes:

“Then Mike looked at me with big, puppy dog eyes, and I knew what he wanted me to say. He was hoping I would say, ‘Oh, Mike, what are you worried about? You are young and you have your whole lives before you.’

“But, of course, I could not say that because I have buried too many young people.”

So instead, Barnes said to the couple: “In my experience, one hundred percent of marriages come to an end, and you are not going to beat those odds.”

Mike protested: “What do you mean?”

Barnes went on.

“Let’s think through the best scenario for the two of you. Let’s say you have seventy years together, becoming more and more passionate until your souls are so interwoven that you do not know who you are without each other. Still, at the end, one of you is going to have to lay the other one into the arms of God, and that will rip your heart out of your chest.

Then Barnes got to his point:

“I say give her up today.”

He didn’t mean stop the marriage.

He meant stop trying to control what would happen.

“I say give her up today. Place her back into the arms of the God who loaned her to you.

“Stop thinking about what you are holding, and start thinking about the grace that will always hold you.”²

As often happens, Barnes lost track of the couple through the years.

Then, a few years ago, Barnes was preaching at a church and told the story about Mike and Sue, how we need to receive our loved ones for the gifts of God that they are...and he was surprised to receive an email from one of the members of that congregation.

It was a friend of Mike and Sue’s.

And Barnes was “devastated” to learn in that email—not that Mike lost Sue too soon, like he was afraid would happen, but that it was Mike who died too early, of a heart attack at age 50.

So Barnes found Sue’s email address, and reached out to her, offering his condolences.

Sue replied: “[Mike’s] death is inexplicable in any logical sense, but I very much feel this is part of the mystery of life. In the six months that have passed, I can say I revere this mystery. I don’t want or need to understand everything about our lives on this earth.”³

Do you know what it’s like to move from missing out...
to being faithful in the place where God...
or just life itself...has planted you?

Have you ever made that journey before?

² Told by the Rev. Dr. M. Craig Barnes in his sermon “Putting Life Together,” preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA, September 23, 2012.

³ Craig Barnes, “The Temporary Gift of Marriage,” in *The Christian Century*, June 14, 2017.

Friends, I cannot explain the divine mystery any better than Sue.

What I can do is suggest that if you find yourself in that place called MISSING OUT...please, please take one more look at Moses.

Moses was supposed to reach the Promised Land.
Of all people, Moses ought to be in the Promised Land, right?

It's easy to believe, but what if it's not true?

What if Moses was NEVER CALLED by God to get God's people into the Promised Land?

I may be mistaken, but I think the Bible says that was Joshua's job.

Moses' job was something else.

- Moses' job was to be with the people while they wandered in the wilderness.
- Moses' job was to keep the people from giving up on God, to make sure they knew that God had NOT abandoned them in the wilderness.

Moses' calling was to be faithful in the place where God had planted him.

Which sounds a lot like the call that God has given to me and to you.

And perhaps the best way to respond to that call, to embark on that journey, is not to focus so much on what we want to control, what we think the journey ought to look like, what we hope to hold onto...but to live into the grace that is holding onto you.

Amen.