

May You Live Until 120 **Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

Until 120!

Each culture has their own birthday traditions. What do you do on your birthday? In the United States, we generally have a party with birthday cake and presents. In Spain, they have several parties for birthdays. In addition to this, “they pull on the ears of the birthday girl or boy to commemorate their special day. They give one tug of the ear for every year of age, plus one extra tug for good luck.” If you want to have an ear massage, go to Spain in your birthday. In China, people eat long noodles with the hope for longevity. In Korea, we eat seaweed soup. This soup is high in iron, iodine and calcium and is good for the mother after child-birth. Eating the soup on your birthday is meant to remind you of your mother’s sacrifice and appreciate her care throughout the past year. Quite interesting. If you would like to try the soup, I can make some for you! Just as there are diverse birthday traditions in the world, there are various ways to wish someone a happy birthday. We generally say ‘happy birthday’ to people on their birthday. If you want to write a more tailored birthday wish, you can google it or ask Chat GPT. “Long live the king or long live the queen’ are Royal Birthday Wishes. There is an interesting traditional Jewish birthday wish that is “I wish you well until a hundred and twenty.” Of course, this wish refers to “a good and long life.” But why 120? The number is associated with Moses who died at 120.

Moses

No one can escape death. Death is something that we all have in common. We don’t know when it will be, but one day, we all will finish of our journey in this world. Moses, the greatest leader and prophet in the history of Israel, was no exception. Today’s scripture tells us about the death of Moses.

What strikes me first in this passage is that Moses died alone on a mountain and no one even knew where his grave was. Moses deserved much better than this. Didn’t he? He could have peacefully laid down on his comfortable bed while his wife gently held his hand and his two sons and grandchildren stood around him. Joshua and the other leaders of Israel might have gathered around him to show their gratitude for his excellent leadership and listened to his final words. The people of Israel might have silently waited outside of Moses’ tent, listening for the sound of a horn that would signal his departure. Weeping and mourning the loss of their great leader. This peaceful and honorable way of death would have been more appropriate for Moses, it seems, but Moses hiked up Mount Nebo alone and died there alone.

Another thing that strikes me in the passage is that Moses was actually able to hike to the top of the mountain in his final moments. As you know, I love hiking. My last hiking trip up a mountain was two years ago. I had hiked that mountain several times before but I was not able to complete my hike because my body in my mid-forties was not in shape for it. But Moses hiked up the mountain at 120! Impressive! According to the Bible, “Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength undiminished” (Deut. 34:7). What made him grow old but stay strong?

Jonathan Sacks, a rabbi, argues that Moses’s strength was unabated “because his eye was undimmed, meaning that he never lost the idealism of his youth, his passion for justice, and for the responsibilities of freedom.”¹ His body may have grown old, but his spirit never grew old. He never lost his sight of the vision God had implanted in him and his passion toward that vision. That’s what made him still strong in his old age. But it’s easy to abandon our ideals, dreams and visions when we see that changing even the smallest part of the world is extremely difficult and even seems impossible.

As you know, I am a member of the Korean Peace Committee of the United Methodist Church. Honestly, it’s not a popular committee among Korean clergy because the peace and unification of Korea is often considered a divisive political issue. Also, it’s been more than seven decades since Korea was divided, so many people do not think that unification is possible. So increasing numbers of people have lost interest in the unification of Korea. As they have lost their hope and vision for reconciliation and unification of the two Koreas, they have become cynical and disheartened. But we also have often faced the same problem.

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, 375.

Do you think that a peaceable world is possible? Do you think Isaiah's vision of beating swords into plowshares is possible? Do you think the eradication of racism, sexism and any discrimination in the world is possible? When we lose our ideals and passion for justice, we grow old. What is remarkable about Moses is that he never lost sight of his ideals and God-given visions. That's what made him still young and strong as he grew older.

Teacher of Next Generation

Along with the Israelites, Moses wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. He knew that he would not be able to physically enter the promised land to which he had spent forty years leading his people. As time passed, he would retreat into his inner world of reminiscence, recalling the day he led the Israelites out of Egypt and parted the Red Sea. He might have regretted his failures and mistakes that hindered him from getting into the promised land. But he didn't do that.

With his undimmed eyes and passion in his heart, Moses in his later life turned his attention to the next generation. In his early life, he was liberator and lawgiver, but he became a teacher to the younger generation. He taught them about who they were, where they came from and where they were going. He reminded them of God's love for their ancestors and urged them to love God with their heart, soul and might. As a keeper of meaning, Moses handed on his wisdom to reflect on past and future, and gave the young the gift of his long experience. In other words, Moses left behind a legacy that would outlive him. Moses knew that he would not be able to see the Israelites enter the promised land, but he wanted to make sure that they could do it and do it rightly. His legacy still lives on today.

I know that our church members are getting older and our church is not what it used to be. I have more wrinkles on my brow and gray hair than when I first came to Asbury, so do you. But as someone once said, "if wrinkles must be written on our brows, let them not be written upon the heart!" Don't give up the vision God has given to you and never lose sight for your ideals, passion for justice, compassion for our neighbors and love for our Lord. Don't be discouraged by short-term challenge we face, but see God's long term plan and eternal promise for us. We may not be able to see the fulfillment of God's promise in our time, but the next generation of Asbury will be able to taste it and enjoy it. Share your wisdom and life testimony with the next generation. Leave a spiritual legacy that outlives you. That was Moses' secret of growing old but staying strong and young.

God is with you until the last moment

Because he fixed his eyes on ideals and visions, Moses could not lay down on his soft bed on the last day of his life. His faith in God's promise pressed him to move forward to see the promised land. 'so he got up from his bed and took his staff. Then, he pushed his old body up the hill and hiked to the top of the mountain, and God showed him an extraordinary vision of the promised land. Starting in the north, and sweeping west and south, Moses saw the land that God was giving the Israelites. Standing on the border of that land at the last moment of his life, Moses saw the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise. He tasted the fulfillment of God's promise, which had not yet been fulfilled. "Moses died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance he saw and greeted them." (Hebrews 11:13) And God was walking with him until the last moment of his life. He didn't die alone on a mountain. God was with him. The same God who walks with us until the end of our journey on earth. I wish all of you well until a hundred twenty. Amen.