

## **“Bumps in the Road”**

Isaiah 40:1-5; Deuteronomy 34:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might lean on your  
when we are weary and find comfort in the face of sorrow. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Yesterday during our Saturday Forum about Older Adult Ministries, our speaker Kathryn Engel was talking about the Five Wishes program that helps people prepare for all the issues that come up as we approach the end of our lives. At one point, she noted how there is a section on the form to write down the songs and scriptures you would like to have used at your memorial service. “You might want to plan it yourself,” she suggested. I can’t remember for sure if she actually mentioned obituaries, but it made me think about my grandfather, who wrote his own obituary. Like my grandfather himself, it was, shall we say, long-winded. I think it took up two whole columns in the local paper. It may very well have been the most expensive part of his departure, since he donated his body to science. But who’s going to tell a dying man he needs to cut the fat?

One of the issues that came up repeatedly during our conversation yesterday was our deeply human desire to be in control. And how aging is a snow-balling process of losing control over things we felt like we had control of before. To write your own obituary is a form of claiming control, trying to shape the narrative that is told about

your life, even after you are gone. There is something to be said for such choices, making a final attempt to show the world who you intended to be. But there's also an argument for letting those who are left behind write your obituary, as a first step toward making sense of who you were and how the world will be different now that you are gone.

I share all of this by way of introduction to these verses in Deuteronomy, which are something of an obituary. They were clearly written many, many years later, so technically, they're more oral history finally being documented than a real-time obituary. But these few short verses contain a remarkable amount of complexity, in the way that obituaries often do, if they're attempting to be honest. If we're telling the truth, grief is almost always complicated. Even if the relationship itself wasn't fraught with complicated emotions, processing the loss is hard, full of conflicting pressures to hold onto the memories but also allow yourself to move on. It's a bumpy road.

The narrative being built in this final chapter of Deuteronomy is as much myth-making as it is obituary, but if we look closely, we can see the complications it's trying to reconcile. The long description of how far Moses can see from the top of mountain doesn't actually have much correlation to the boundaries of the kingdom of Israel at any point in its history – because that is not the point. This is more of a “I caught a fish this big” testimony to the greatness of Moses, not the measure of the promised land. From a literary perspective, you could argue that the point is to use more words

describing what Moses is seeing than are needed to admit at the end of the paragraph that he will only see it from afar, but never actually arrive there. There is a silent protest in the way this is written, an unspoken assertion that it isn't fair that Moses never got to enter the promised land.

A similar narrative and counter narrative are written into the next paragraph, which is even more obituarial. The exaggerated description of Moses' golden years – living to 120, but with absolutely no sign of diminished capacity – offsets the fact that somehow the Israelites lost track of where he was buried. This people who have a name for every rock and hill across the countryside based on something that happened there, somehow forgot to note where they buried their most important prophet and leader. They were there for 30 days, but apparently they were so overcome by grief that they forgot to check their latitude and longitude. But of course what's important is that he was 120 years old with the eyesight and energy of a 30-year-old!

Grief is complicated. Therapists talk about “complicated grief” as a specific situation in which the relationships involved were especially messy, when grief is mixed in with relief or anger or guilt. But in honesty, all grief is complicated. Each new loss opens up a road we haven't walked before, full of twists and turns and obstacles to bump into. We can begin to understand the longing Isaiah confesses in those verses from chapter 40, for a road through the desert that is straight and flat and plain. I have usually seen this promise of the mountains coming down and the valleys coming up as

a misguided wish – why on earth would we want to diminish the glory of the mountains and the valleys? But yesterday, as we talked about the measures that sometimes need to be taken to make a home safe for someone whose capacity to walk has changed, it occurred to me that the issue here is tripping hazards. Is it wrong to ask God to remove the throw rugs from our lives, when we know they could be the cause of a broken hip? When moving forward has become a struggle, slow and hard, wishing for level ground isn't a trivial request; it's a life-saving necessity.

More metaphorically, when we've been through the ringer – whether because of the loss of a loved one that stretched out over months or years or because of some other stressful season of life – any tripping hazard in the road can knock us down. Turning into a new aisle at the store, suddenly confronted by their favorite treat, and suddenly tears are welling up. Cleaning out a closet at home, opening a box and discovering the broken thing that caused so much yelling years ago, and all sorts of emotions threaten to overpower us.

And yet— and yet, would we really want to live in a world that is entirely flat? As a native to the Great Plains, I can tell you that there's something majestic about being constantly exposed to that much sky. Some of you hill country dwellers probably couldn't handle it. But if we're talking about our emotional landscape, we need to take care if we're wishing for an easier path. Each of those obstacles, those tripping hazards, those things that stop us in our tracks and make us weep – they are all

testaments to love. A world where the path is smooth is a world where our loved one has been entirely removed. Those memories that burst out uninvited may be hard, but life without them would be even bleaker.

Grief is complicated because love is complicated, because relationships are complicated, because life is complicated. We may think we'd like it to be easier, but I'm pretty sure we wouldn't prefer the alternative. The thing about the path of grief (and even just life itself) is that it isn't a race. Obstacles are only tripping hazards if you're in a hurry. If you've come to terms with taking all the time you need, those obstacles can be invitations to rest and reflections, sources of wonder and thanksgiving, opportunities to consider where you've been and who you will become as you journey forward. Those thirty days the Israelites stayed to mourn in the plains of Moab weren't a deadline to get their emotions in order; they were a gracious plenty of days to stop and tell stories and give thanks for their beloved leader who had moved on. There is no deadline, no expiration date on grief. The road ahead will continue to be strewn with things that could trip us up, if we try to move past them too quickly. Rather than grasping at control or demanding that God make it easier, let us instead seek Jesus as our companion, inviting him to walk alongside us and keep us steady, even when there are boulders to climb over or mud to trudge through. The One who invited us onto this path is faithful and will not leave us. Hallelujah and Amen.