

“Lives That Matter”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
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This is a sermon about making our lives matter.

Earlier this winter, I climbed the 178 steps up to the top of the lighthouse at Tybee Island. I was with our son Joseph, but he wasn't eager to trod up that claustrophobic, spiraling staircase to the top. I didn't mind a bit. My problem, as I've told you before, was stepping out onto the grated catwalk affixed to the outside of that lighthouse that ringed the top. The view was stunning, but looking down through that grate to the very, very distant ground terrified me.

Moses may have felt similarly on the top of Mount Nebo looking out at the promised land. In his case, the perspective not the height, might have been sobering. Having that kind of perspective can make you giddy.

God had taken him up. God showed him around—Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.

This was the land God swore he would give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. God wanted Moses to see it. God wanted Moses to know a promise was being fulfilled. But Moses wouldn't go there. God would send Joshua, but not Moses.

This is where old Moses died.

We often get philosophical when we ponder the end of our lives. Standing on our Mount Nebo, we look at where our offspring are going, and we might be afraid for them. “I wish I could come along,” we might say. “How will they make it without me?” Or, “I have so much I still want to do with this life,” we might say. But life is ebbing away. We feel it in our bones. And we know, looking forward, we don't have as much life left as we'd like.

In the looking backwards, we might wonder if our lives were lived as fully as we could have lived them. Should I have been a teacher? I wish I'd spent more times with my kids and less time at the office. These are the sorts of things we notice when standing on life's Mount Nebos.

This is the sort of question Private Ryan asked.

You might remember that movie—Saving Private Ryan—where Captain John Miller (played by Tom Hanks) leads a detachment of men to find Private Ryan somewhere on the battlefield of the European campaign in WWII. All three of Ryan's brothers have been killed in action, and General George Marshall himself wants the surviving one, James Francis Ryan, to be found and sent home so that not all of the Ryan boys are lost in the war. Marshall wants something for that mother and father to have and to hold after the war. Captain Miller finds and retrieves Ryan, and sends him home, though not all in that detachment, including Miller, survive.

At the end of the film, the old man Ryan gathers with his family in the graveyard at Omaha Beach. He finds the gravestone of Captain Miller. He falls to his arthritic knees in tears. His wife and grown kids surround him. He looks into their eyes and asks them, "Was it worth it? Was my life worth it?" But this is not a question for him family to answer. It is a question that Ryan and God must figure out alone.

Those are the sorts of questions we ask about our lives when we stand on top of the Mount Nebo of our life. Did I use my gifts wisely? Was I worthy of God's grace shed for me? Was I generous with the gifts entrusted to my care? *Was my life worth it?*

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From our vantage way up here, we know every mortal's days are limited. For some of us, we have many years behind us but fewer years ahead. Perspective allows us to ponder these kinds of stark truths.

Perhaps it's here and now that we pause and say a prayer.

Lord, thank you for leading me safe this far. Through many dangers, toils, and snares you have been my guide, my harbor, my heart.

And, when it's my time, Redeemer God, thank you for walking right by my side and leading me step by step home.

In the meantime, Lord, help me to use my remaining energies in my life's remaining seasons well. By your grace, teach me to be generous with the gifts you've entrusted to my care. Help me to waste nothing more of my remaining days. Help me to claim your calling on my life without fear, hesitation, or excuse. Light a fire in my life, O God. And when people look to me for hope, might they be encouraged. May they see in my life the clearest possible reflection of your holy light. Help me, holy God, to set the light that is my life not in the basement but on the lampstand. From on top of my Mount Nebo, perhaps the whole world can see your light, O God, reflected in my imperfect witness and my fractious patience and even my selfish love.

My prayer is that as we look backwards from Mount Nebo, we tell God thanks. And as we look forward, my prayer is we put that gratitude into tangible action.

*Lord Prepare me, to be a sanctuary/
Pure and holy, tried and true/
With thanksgiving, I'll be a living/
Sanctuary for you.*

AMEN.