

Preparing for a World We Cannot See

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2009

by Dr. Frank Trotter

In Richard Strauss's beloved opera, *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Knight of the Rose*), the Marchallin, an aristocratic woman and a leader of society, faces the inevitability of time. In "her famous, heart-breaking monologue at the end of Act I, in which she recalls her youth and bafflement at the workings of time..., [she ponders], 'I am still the same person... It is all such a mystery...'" The bass clarinet, an instrument often used by Strauss to portray mystery, murmurs. 'Time is indeed a strange thing,' she muses. 'It trickles across our faces. It trickles in the mirror there. It flows around my temples.' Sometimes in the middle of the night, she arises and stops the clocks around the house... Of this section, the musicologist Ernest Newman wrote, 'The music breathes the very subtlest essence of wisdom, tenderness and a life's philosophy.'"¹ For the Marchallin, time suddenly moves too quickly.

In today's scripture lesson, Moses, the greatest figure in the Hebrew Bible, has spent forty years, a full third of his life, in leading the Israelites on an incredible journey. For Yahweh had told him, "Behold, I am leading you to the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey, that I promised to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To get there, Moses and the Israelites escape from the Pharaoh in Egypt, God leads them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, they somehow walk on dry land through the Red Sea, and they find their way to the base of Mount Sinai – the holiest mountain – where Yahweh tells Moses to climb to the top.

Now, Moses and the people have traveled to the land just to the east of present-day Israel to a land called Moab now known as western Jordan. Yahweh comes to Moses and tells him to climb a second mountain where even today, the view from the top of Mount Nebo is spectacular. As one looks west, the land known then as Canaan is stretched out from north to south. This is the Promised Land, what we now refer to as the Holy Land. It is to this sacred place that God has been leading them.

¹ Daniel J. Wakin, "A Cougar Caught in Time's Trap," *New York Times*, October 8, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/arts/music/11waki.html?ref=arts>.

Just as they seem to be arriving, the LORD tells Moses that his life is ending, that he will not see the land of Canaan that lies out there on the horizon; that instead, he will die here on the top of Mount Nebo. For Moses, those words from Yahweh are premature; they have come too soon. He had long thought that he would enter Canaan and be buried there. Instead, Yahweh tells him, “You shall die here and be gathered to your ancestors.” (Deuteronomy 32:50)

Dr. Eric Schansberg, a member of the faculty at Indiana University, writes about a question that occurred to him and some colleagues. He says, “The first question I [would ask is] about the sort of music one would use to accompany the scene of Moses ascending the mountain and looking out from Mt. Nebo to Canaan. Our answer was some combination of triumphant, majestic, and bittersweet. It is a wonderful ending to a staggeringly great life – and yet, there is this poignancy of Moses only seeing the Promised Land instead of entering it.”²

The Bible tells us that no one knows to this day exactly where Moses is buried. Jewish tradition tells us that it was God’s angels who carried his body to its final resting place.

Death is such an oxymoron, isn’t it? As Dr. Rella Kushelevsky says, “The soul is concealed and preserved, the body decomposes. The description of the image of Moses stretches out to touch the threshold of immortality but there, still within the boundaries of humanity, it remains. This border marks the extremities and conflicts in man’s existence, especially that inevitable passage from life to death.”³

In the mid 1800’s, an Irish poetess by the name of Cecil Frances Alexander wrote about “The Burial of Moses”⁴ in verse:

² Eric Schansbeg, <http://schansblog.blogspot.com/2008/04/death-of-moses.html>.

³ Rella Kushelevsky, “A Study of the Midrashic Sources on the Death of Moses,” <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/sukot/kushel.html>. Dr. Kushelevsky is a member of the faculty at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

⁴ Cecil Frances Alexander (1818 – 1895), “The Burial of Moses,” quoted in *Journeys Through Bookland*, Vol. 4 by Charles Herbert Sylvester, http://books.google.com/books?id=XGZHAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA266&lpg=PA266&dq=%22The+burial+of+Moses%22+cecil+francis+alexander&source=bl&ots=gn0kLoAYCV&sig=LH9PmJexMDew6yUnlIQ9lahQm0E&hl=en&ei=cR_lSteTN5HusgPyiIWqAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CCEQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=&f=false. The author was an Irish hymn writer and poetess.

By Nebo's lonely mountain,
On this side Jordan's wave,
In a vale in the land of Moab,
There lies a lonely grave:
But no man dug that sepulcher,
And no man saw it e'er;
For the angels of God upturned the sod,
And laid the dead man there.

Thus was the grandest funeral
That ever passed on earth;
But no man heard the tramping,
Or saw the train go forth.
Noiselessly as the daylight
Comes when the night is done,
And the crimson streak on ocean's cheek
Grows into the great sun;

Noiselessly as the springtime
Her crown of verdure waves,
And all the trees on all the hills
Open their thousand leaves, —
So, without sound of music,
Or voice of them that wept,
Silently down from the mountain's crown
The great procession swept.

Perchance the bald old eagle,
On gray Beth-peor's height,
Out of his rocky eyrie,
Looked on the wondrous sight;
Perchance the lion stalking
Still shuns that hallowed spot:
For beast and bird have seen and heard
That which man knoweth not.

But when the warrior dieth,
His comrades in the war,
With arms reversed, and muffled drum,
Follow the funeral car;
They show the banners taken,

They tell his battles won,
And after him lead his masterless steed,
While peals the minute gun.

Amid the nobles of the land
Men lay the sage to rest,
And give the bard an honored place,
With costly marble drest,
In the great minster transept,
Where lights like glories fall,
And the choir sings, and the organ rings,
Along the emblazoned wall.

This was the truest warrior
That ever buckled sword;
This the most gifted poet
That ever breathed a word;
And never earth's philosopher
Traced with his golden pen
On the deathless page, truths half so sage
As he wrote down for men.

And had he not high honor?
The hillside for his pall;
To lie in state while angels wait
With stars for tapers tall;
And the dark rock pines, like tossing plumes,
Over his bier to wave;
And God's own Hand, in that lonely land,
To lay him in the grave, —

In that strange grave, without a name,
Whence his uncoffined clay
Shall break again — O wondrous thought! —
Before the Judgment Day,
And stand with glory wrapped around,
On the hills he never trod,
And speak of the strife, that won our life,
With the incarnate Son of God.

O lonely grave in Moab's land!
O dark Beth-peor's hill!

Speak to these curious hearts of ours,
And teach them to be still.
God hath His mysterious of grace, —
Ways that we cannot tell:
He hides them deep, like the hidden sleep
Of him He loved so well.

Pope Paul VI once said, “Every mother is like Moses. She does not enter the promised land. She prepares a world she will not see.”⁵

Cannot those words be said of all of our forefathers and foremothers in faith whom we remember on All Saints Day? Cannot these words be said of those faithful ones now, those saints among us who do their best to get the sacred community to the next step of the journey?

After all, as the Persian poet and philosopher Hafiz wrote in the 1300’s, “God has written a thousand promises all over your heart that say, Life, life, life is far too sacred to ever end.”⁶

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Pope Paul VI (1897 – 1978), http://thinkexist.com/quotation/every_mother_is_like_moses-she_does_not_enter_the/218261.html.

⁶ Hafiz (1315 – 1390), quoted by Matthew Fox in *The Hidden Spirituality of Men: Ten Metaphors to Awaken the Sacred Masculine* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008), http://books.google.com/books?id=widVy77KqFwC&pg=PA204&lpg=PA204&dq=Hafez+%2B+%22God+has+written+a+thousand+promises+all+over+your+heart...%22&source=bl&ots=6lWiF-DaxV&sig=HEGwQG6DuYE3tqcr8o4M70vQ3w&hl=en&ei=M8XtSsXBBIXSsgPk7cD1Aw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CBQQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=&f=false.