

October 25, 2020 (Focus: Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

In a recent episode of the PBS show “American Masters,” the great American conductor and classical musician Michael Tilson Thomas reflected on how important the concept of timing was for “the situation of music” and how he started to understand this as a 17-year-old driving around LA listening to the precise musical timing of, surprisingly, James Brown music. Tilson Thomas said that through such insights, he came to understand that the job of a conductor was “getting a large group of varied people to agree on ‘where now is’.” That is, it was about being on the same page, at the same place in a piece, and understanding not just what note was to be played, but what was the emotion of the piece, and even what was it that the audience needed to connect with in that very moment. It’s a mindfulness thing, to be of ‘the moment,’ but in an orchestra it is also about working together, each member bringing their own diverse voices to that moment, but also working together, to bring to the world something that makes it a better place to live.

Here in our reading we have Moses, in a particular moment, a particularly important and poignant moment. He has led the Israelites through the wilderness, a journey of a generation, and he is at the cusp of bringing them at last into the promised land, the land of blessing and bounty that will be so life affirming and life giving after the great time of struggle, and he is in that moment. He is in the now, the moment when he doesn’t just believe but he knows that God’s promises will indeed be fulfilled, for the good of his people. He is in the moment, and it will be his last moment.

He is standing on Mount Nebo, and he sees the refreshing waters of the River Jordan, and the fertile valleys lie before him and he knows that the people he has led through the wasteland will find a home there, but he also knows that he will not get there. As observers, we likely focus on how unfair that seems, that after all that work, and all the grief he took, that Moses does not get to go into the promised land, and maybe it is unfair.

But Moses is in the moment, he is ‘where now is.’ It is a place he has been before. When he helped a slave brutalized by the Egyptians which led to his exile. When he made a life in that exile, finding contentment in the now. When he encountered God in the burning bush, and in that moment recognized not just the place but also the time as holy. Facing Pharaoh and not backing down, knowing in that moment he was doing God’s work for God’s people. In that difficult journey through the sea and across the desert. For each time and place

that Moses found himself in, was a time and place that he found himself with God.

And where now is for Moses is on that mountaintop, between what was and what will be. Not between what was and what could be, but between what was and what will be. And his heart is at peace, because maybe he realized that just getting his people to this point was his own promised land. And his heart is at peace, because where now is for him is with God, knowing God's promises will be fulfilled.

Like Moses up there on Mount Nebo, we too are at a pivotal point in time, between what was and what will be, but maybe we are still worried that it will not be. Maybe we are holding our breaths, worried that what we need so much in our world might not come to be. Such uncertainty has for many lead to sleepless nights and grey hairs and ulcers. Such uncertainty can leave us immobile, muscles tense, waiting to see what we need to do next. I know, I've been feeling this, have you? What has been weighing on your heart these days that maybe has left you wondering and worried about where now is, and where tomorrow might be?

I've gotten my heart wrapped up in COVID cases and daily tallies and poll numbers and how many lies were spread from a number of podiums recently. I've gotten my heart wrapped up in people in need of rent money or money for groceries. I've gotten my heart wrapped up in another killing of a black man at the hands of the police, and 534 children taken from their families at the border and now we can't find their parents and may never be able to, planned and deliberate cruelty done in our name. I've gotten my heart wrapped up wondering about the forces at work poised to take away marriage rights for some and taking choice over what happens to their bodies away from others and health care away from so many as we face the worst of a pandemic. I've got my heart wrapped up worried about who will be harmed by those who think that "where now is" should be about looking toward the past instead of the future. It's no wonder that 'where now is' may not be where we wish it were.

But "where now is" is where it should be: on the cusp between what was and what will be. And "where now is" is a time and place where we are, and where we are with God. And "where now is" is a time and place where we are, and where we are with God, and where we can know, yes, really know and trust that God's promises will be fulfilled. We don't know the exact timing of the fulfillment of God's promises, but we know how they will be fulfilled – through us and people like us, who know ourselves to be with God, and to be walking with God in Jesus

Christ. Sometimes it is easy to forget this, that God's promises will be fulfilled through us and others like us, because the world's view gets in the way of the vision we have of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

But that mountaintop we have been struggling to climb over, well, we can see the divine vision ahead now. As someone who had every reason not to trust God or humanity once so faithfully said, we have been to the mountaintop, and we know what the promised land is. Jesus told us about it, in the beatitudes. And he showed us, in the welcoming table and the healing touch. And he showed us how, in the great commandment. We just have to hold onto that vision, now, where now is, this imperfect now, which is the moment for us to bring our individual gifts and talents and voices, and now is the moment for us to work together, agreeing on where now is, and what the promised land is that we are striving for. And we have to hold onto the belief that God is with us now, and leading us forward.

For like Moses, the place where we are, the place where now is, is us, with God. God with us, us with God. God is our dwelling place. God holds us, now and always, us individually and us as a community of faith. God is our dwelling place. In isolation or quarantine or on the front lines, God is our dwelling place, holding us in love, full of mercy and grace, peace and love. God is our dwelling place, in all our previous moments, God is our dwelling place where now is, and where each now will be to come. God is our dwelling place; our true home is in the heart of God. So in this moment, this imperfect moment in time, know that where now is is where we are together as a community of faith, and it is where God is. Fear not, for we are held by God, in love, in such a time as this, and in all our "nows" to come. And that is indeed good news for us and all creation today.

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 [paraphrase for prayer after sermon]

O God, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God, you are our dwelling place.

Have compassion on us! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. We have seen and experienced evil; bring us gladness that the work you call us to will be fulfilled, for the sake of all your children. O God, let your blessings upon us, and prosper the work of our hands, for now and all tomorrows. Amen.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, in this time of changeable days, of cold nights and winds that rattle the windows, we give thanks for the warmth of your love and for the calm blessing of your grace.

Help us with endurance for the trek through the wilderness of pandemic has been long already, yet we know that there is more journey ahead. As the days grow shorter and the night longer, help us to light the way for one another. There is so much more light and fullness of life needed in our world. There are so many in our world who don't feel the abundance of life force that this season entails, it is a season they have not felt was made for them, for others maybe, but not for them. So many feel just the cold of disregard and loneliness, for they do not know love and human kindness. For those discriminated against, for the color of their skin, because of whom they love, for how they experience their own gender, for their nation of origin, for the lack of money or wealthy they possess, or for the way their bodies manifest illness or disease, we pray that we may come to always be a source of love and care for them. God bless them and keep them, and help us all to work to change hearts and minds that would choose to oppress, abuse, and even take the life of those who some too easily and readily put into the category of "other," but who are indeed are siblings in Christ. Help us to distribute the harvest of blessings that you intend for all.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world suffering in body, mind, and spirit, in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

We hold in our prayers today especially those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. Bless them and all of us with your healing compassion and care.

Moment of silent meditation...

Breathe new breath into us, O Spirit of the living God. Fall afresh on us. Help us to breathe new life and new hope into our communities, especially in these uncertain times. With each breath we take, help us to be filled with your patience, your hope, your joy, your strength, your courage, your love. With each breath we take in and exhale, help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as we taught to us by the one we call messiah, son of the living God, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...