"Transitional Living", A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, October 25, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

4The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." (Deuteronomy 34:4)

37He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:27-29)

We live in a world that is embroiled in so many crises that it is becoming painful and emotionally exhausting to keep up with the news. The wars in Iran and Ukraine that just drag on and on, contentious and vitriolic mid-term elections coming up in the next two weeks, inflation and rising energy costs making it difficult for ordinary families to make ends meet all work to create an atmosphere of anxiety and tension. And for St. Mark's on top of all the angst in the world outside, the transition process in which you are engaged is its own source of uncertainty and anxiety. In the midst of all this, there is almost nowhere in the world at the moment that feels like "the promised land" to anyone, resident or visitor.

Today we hear the story of the death of Moses, the great leader appointed by God to take the Ancient Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and to a Promised Land that God had prepared for them. Moses is eulogized as the greatest prophet Israel had ever seen. *"1He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, 12and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel."* For much of the summer and fall we have followed Moses and the Israelites on their journey from Egypt and through the wilderness, a trying time during which the Israelites tried Moses' patience and often pushed him to the brink of despair. The story of Moses' death is poignant, dignified and ultimately peaceful, even though we learn that he is not permitted to enter the Promised Land with his people.

How sad that Moses, who worked so diligently and faithfully leading the Israelites across the Red Sea out of Egypt into freedom, who wandered with them for 40 years in the wilderness, who saw God face to face on Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, who argued and bartered and negotiated with God on behalf of his people, even when they were mumbling and murmuring and complaining against him, how sad that he never sees the Promised Land. He gets right to the edge of it and then dies. It doesn't seem fair somehow, that after all that work and all that faithfulness in the midst of harsh conditions and complaining constituents, after years of eating manna and the occasional quail and having to contend with the

capriciousness of his followers, Moses doesn't get to reap the rewards of the wilderness wanderings. When I visited Israel in 2016 we visited Jordan and stood at the place where today's story took place, looking out over the vista that Moses was shown even as he was told he would not be entering that Promised Land. From up on Mt. Nebo you can see for miles, all the way to Jerusalem on a clear day. Moses gazed upon it but never got there.

Moses' story is powerful because it resonates so fully with the realities of all of our earthly lives. The life each of us lives on this earth for however long it lasts, is a transitional moment in the long span of history. We are each called into being by our loving God and given our vocations and callings by God. We Christians enter into covenant with God at baptism and then spend the rest of our days living into that covenant, being faithful even when we can't seem to see the end results we thought were awaiting us for all our efforts. And like Moses, all that we do while we wander our earthly wilderness is preparation for a future that seems always just beyond our reach. We raise our children and grandchildren to carry on after we are gone, and we try to be good stewards of our resources so that they will be there for the benefit of those who will come after us. If we are being true to our call from God, we make decisions in our lifetime that will bear fruit not only for us but for those who will follow us. Jesus summarizes God's commandments in the simple maxim – Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. Loving neighbor as self assumes that we will act for the benefit of others, not for our own self-interest and greed.

That many people in power both in politics and in corporate life, here and abroad do not understand this biblical wisdom about the transitional nature of earthly life is obvious. The ever widening gap between those with wealth and everyone else, the looting of the public purse to enrich billionaires and politicians, the environmental degradation that threatens the very sustainability of our planet are all the results of human greed and selfishness and behaviors that preference the interests of an elite few over the good of the world as a whole. Our biblical texts are unequivocally clear that God expects us to live in such a way as to protect the common good, to create a world in which all are fed, all are safe, all are healthy, and where the resources which God has made available to all of God's children are distributed fairly among all of God's children. Loving our neighbor means caring about the welfare of the neighbor, whether that neighbor looks like you or not. In our modern day, the whole world in all its diversity are our neighbors and we are called to the kind of faithfulness and integrity that Moses exhibited as he endured years of hardship and challenge in the wilderness.

Moses and Jesus model for us how we are to live in this world and serve it in God's name. Both of them understood what it is to live in a world that is perpetually in transition. Everything is always changing, nothing ever stays the same and the spiritual life is about finding God in the midst of all the uncertainties and upheavals of earthly life. Moses received the covenant on Mt. Sinai and Jesus continued that

covenant in his life and ministry and in the sacred mystery he established in his name on the night before he died. God demanded of Moses and of Jesus and his followers that we live our lives in this world, this transitional, always changing world, on the basis of the commandments to love – love God and love neighbor. And loving neighbor carries with it some pretty concrete expectations about respecting human dignity, feeding the poor, housing the homeless and being a voice for the voiceless.

Yes, it seems unfair that Moses worked so hard and so faithfully and yet was never permitted to enter the Promised Land. As it turns out, for Moses the wilderness **was** his Promised Land. The wilderness wanderings with all the challenges and uncertainties and conflict was exactly where Moses was meant to be. Indeed, the biblical story tells us that when Joshua, Moses' successor and the Israelites entered the land of Canaan life was far from rosy there. War, violence, conflict and more struggles followed them into that Promised Land, a place which turned out to be just as fraught as the wilderness had been. Sadly that Promised Land is, as we speak, the locus of terrible violence and war, lo these many centuries later. Moses served God and the Israelites faithfully and enjoyed the privilege of his intimate relationship with God during his entire ministry with them. God rewarded him with a vision of what the future might look like, but he was not destined to be part of that future vision. His role was to shepherd the Israelites during that wilderness time, which had its own set of challenges and its own peculiar rewards.

We have a lot in common with Moses. Everything we do in the course of our lives as faithful Christians, we do in the midst of difficult, challenging and sometimes overwhelming present realities often unable to see how what we are doing will work out in the end. St. Mark's is living through a transitional time, with all the challenges and uncertainty that our forebears experienced in that wilderness. It is easy to get frustrated when we don't seem to arrive at some hoped for destination as quickly as we'd like to, when it seems that the transition is taking forever. Like Moses and the Israelites, getting to the promised land turns out to be far more arduous than we thought at first. If you are feeling anxious about a search process that has been going on for 18 months, be thankful that your process will almost certainly not take 40 years!

Most of earthly life is an exercise in transitional living, as we juggle present realities in the hopes of a better future. It's important to have a vision of that hoped for future, but equally important to cultivate Moses' ability to live in the present moment, doing what is right and good for this moment. In the uncertain and anxious transitional time God is working on us, teaching us and forming us so that we are ready for what awaits in that longed for Promised Land with all the challenges it will bring. Loving God and loving neighbor is how we stay centered and grounded in the midst of the perpetual transitions and changes of earthly life. No matter what else changes in life, and absolutely everything does, what does not change, ever, is the love of God for us and our obligation to live into that love in concrete ways by pouring

that love back out into our world. As the psalmist prayed to God, so we pray – “Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations….Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands.” (Psalm 90) Amen.