October 25, 2026

In the name of the F, S, HS. Amen.

Last week, in my work as a hospital chaplain, I met a man who had recently undergone treatment for pancreatic cancer. His cancer had been found early. He had endured major surgery and had just received very good news from a follow-up procedure. As far as his doctors could tell, he was clear.

He was full of joy. Not a shallow or oblivious joy. His body had been through something terrible, and his memories of that pain was still fresh. But he was grateful to be alive. He was grateful for his doctors. He was grateful to God.

He had asked to see a chaplain because medical preparations and travel had kept him from church the previous Sunday. He wanted someone to pray with him.

I did not stay long. He made it clear that prayer was all he wanted. I left his room, but he stayed with me. He brought up for me - my dad.

Walking back through the hospital, I stopped at a window overlooking a garden. And there, for a moment, I was with my dad.

Dad loved to garden. He died of pancreatic cancer in 2020. He was also capable of great joy. But unlike the man I had just met, he was explicitly **not** religious. He was also stubborn about medical care.

Death and grief do strange things to memory.

It was Thanksgiving 2019 I saw him not himself, he had pain in his abdomen and did not feel like eating. My father always enjoyed eating. I remember my mom and dad traveling quite a bit during those months–or at least I think that was the reason he could not get to the doctor until January.

Much of what followed remains a blur for me. COVID is part of that. What I remember most clearly is my feeling of urgency: doctors to call, conversations to have, decisions to make.

Those memories are largely shaped by what followed…disbelief, then solid hope, but pretty soon, it was a steady, unrelenting decline.

The dust didn't settle for a long time after he died. In the haze, a lot of similar questions poked through–what happened? And what if…?

What if he had gone to the doctor sooner? What if **we** had known earlier? What if …? Might he still be alive today?

There is no answer to those questions. There is only the life that he lived, the love that he shared, and my painful sense of what remains unfinished.

Walking through a haze is one way to describe grief.

My grief has required different things at different times.

- I have needed the physical presence of family and friends.
- I have needed unobstructed space alone.
- I have needed rituals that mark time and loss in a way solid enough to help me carry them.

So when I read the death of Moses this week, I found myself back at that hospital window, looking out at the garden and thinking about Dad.

Moses is a very different kind of father figure. He spent forty years leading Israel toward the promised land. He confronted Pharaoh, led the people through the sea, received the law, endured their complaints, pleaded with God on their behalf, and kept walking with them through the wilderness. Moses is an institution.

But then, at the end, there is human Moses walking with a quite human-like God:

> God takes Moses up a mountain and shows him the land.

> “This is the land,” God tells him. “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over.”

Moses comes close enough to see the promise, but he will not walk in its fulfillment.

It is a strange and painful ending. It’s so brief–the writer barely stops. It’s unfair–Moses’ whole life has been directed toward this destination, but someone else will lead the people into it?

One of the things I have come to love about the Hebrew Bible is that it took shape over many centuries. What **appears** to be one continuous narrative is **actually** a tapestry woven from the memories, convictions, questions, and arguments of different communities.

Scholars continue to debate precisely where one voice ends and another begins. But the seams are especially visible–and I find instructive–in the story of Moses’ death.

I find myself reading those seams as a chaplain looking for spiritual care.

Every voice is protecting something it loves, holding space open for our souls. Every voice is responding to something the community needs.

- One voice takes Moses up the mountain, shows him the whole land, and remembers the promise of God.
    - That voice gives the people **orientation**. It places this death inside a story larger than one life.
- Another voice tells us that Moses died “at the mouth of God,” as the Hebrew literally puts it, and that God buried him in a place no one else knows.
    - That voice offers **intimacy**. Moses is alone, but he is not abandoned. At the boundary no one else can cross with him, God remains.
- Another voice gives the people thirty days to mourn.

    - That voice provides **ritual**. The people do not have to continue immediately as though nothing has happened. Their grief is given time and communal form.
- Another voice turns toward Joshua, upon whom Moses has laid his hands.
    - That voice provides **continuity**. Moses is gone, but the wisdom, the calling, and the work have not disappeared.
- And another voice looks back across the whole of Moses' life and says, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."
    - That voice bears **witness**. It says that this particular person mattered and cannot simply be replaced.

The Bible does not give us one explanation capable of containing Moses' death. It is offering us several forms of care.

- We need someone to tell the truth about what was not completed.
- We need assurance that no one dies abandoned by God.
- We need permission to mourn.
- We need help discovering how life can continue.
- And we need someone to say of the person we have lost: There was no one else quite like them.

Moses is gone, but the promise is not gone.

> Joshua will lead differently because Joshua is not Moses. The people must live without the person who formed them. But something has passed from Moses into Joshua and into the community. The story can continue even though the one who carried it this far cannot carry it any farther.

As a son, and as a father, I find this painful and comforting.

> So much of parenting is an act of faith in a future we cannot control. We love our children, teach them, worry about them, feed them thousands of meals, drive them to thousands of activities—and slowly discover that their lives do not belong to us.

> We hope to see where they are going. We may be given glimpses. But we cannot cross every threshold with them.

The same is true of the other ***work*** love gives us.

> We begin things someone else will finish. We care for people whose futures we cannot control. We plant trees beneath whose shade we may never sit. We pass on what wisdom we possess and entrust the future to other hands.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that everything hangs upon love of God and love of our neighbor.

> He does not promise that love will give us control. Love did not give Moses possession of the promised land. Love does not allow parents to determine their children's futures. Love cannot guarantee that our deepest hopes will be fulfilled in the ways we imagine.

Love does something else: Love **gives itself faithfully** within the life we have actually been given.

In a few moments, we will gather around this altar. We will bring the lives we have lived and the lives we wish we could have lived. We will bring the people we have lost, the questions that remain unanswered, the work we have completed, and what remains unfinished.

And there, together, we will receive a glimpse of the promised land.

The Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet: a meal from God's promised future received here in the present. Around this table, we are joined with one another, with those who came before us, and with those who will come after us.

None of us created this community alone. None of us will complete the work of God.

We receive it. We share it. We place it into one another's hands.

The man I met last week could not gather with his congregation. But the prayer of the church reached him in a hospital room. He offered his joy, his gratitude, and whatever fears remained - to God, and another person stood beside him and prayed.

My father would not have described his life in those terms. I have no need to turn him into someone he was not. I remember the particular person he was: his stubbornness, his joy, his love of his family and his plants, and the questions his death left behind.

There was no one else quite like him.

There was no one quite like Moses.

There is no one quite like the person whose absence you still feel.

Their lives remain unfinished. So do ours.

But God's promise does not depend upon any one of us finishing everything. We are asked

- to love God, to love one another,
- to work with and offer back what has been placed in our hands,
- and then to entrust the future to God.

Today we come to the table together: those who are grieving and those who are celebrating, those who can see the promise clearly and those who may not see it yet.

We receive the bread.

We receive one another.

And for this part of the journey, that is enough.

Amen.