Introduction: The Strange Ending of This Story Of Moses’ Life. Eugene Peterson suggests we need this ending because, “Most of us are incorrigible romanticizers of matters ‘spiritual.’ We are prone to go off of tangents of utopian fantasy, following the line that if God is involved in all of this, and if we are involved rightly, the community that results will be idyllic.” We remain convinced, against all of our experience, that the perfect church must be out there somewhere – or that if we could just find a small group of the right people we would have “real community.”

I. It Seems Like Things Are Looking Up, Finally.

1. Moses is getting old and will die soon, but he has appointed Joshua to lead and he is a good guy. Joshua has shown himself faithful, and valiant – and most importantly he trusted God even when things looked grim (Numbers 14). And God gave His approval to Joshua, inviting both he and Moses to the Tent of Meeting (31:14).

2. God has promised to go before them into the Promised Land and to never leave or forsake them (31:3-6). He reminds them of His power and patience and tells them repeatedly to not be afraid because He will be with them. God wants Israel to know that while Moses was a great leader, God was the One who had watched over them and fought for them – and He was committed to them. (This seems to be why God buried Moses Himself where no one could find his body – Deut 34)

3. Moses has left them a written record for them to remember the Lord and all he had done. This last of the five books of Moses is really a long sermon (chapters 1-30 of Deut.) Moses commanded that it be read every seven years during the Feast of Booths, which was an annual reminder of the wilderness wanderings of God’s people. It is interesting to compare the laws in Deuteronomy with those in Exodus and Leviticus – those in Deuteronomy give instruction for how the community is to live in the Promised Land and has a particular focus on providing protection for the weak and vulnerable of society. The sermon whets their appetite for the new life in the Land to come.

4. It seems like everything Israel had hoped for was about to come true! Moses even gets a view of the Promised Land before He dies (Deut 34). Peterson sums up the scene well, “The scenario on display... that day is totally satisfying: a congregation of free people, thoroughly trained in worship and obedience, ready to enter a land of promise. Moses’ sermon has just brought it all present and alive before them, those splendid sentences and stories reverberating in their ears. Joshua holds the reigns of leadership that Moses has just placed in his hands. Moses and Joshua stand before the Tent of Meeting; the pillar of cloud, God’s presence among them, appears in confirmation and blessing. A dramatic, satisfying moment. A perfect ending. Except. Except there is one thing more. God has a private word with Moses. It couldn’t have been pleasant for Moses to hear; and it certainly isn’t pleasant for us to read. But if we are going to be prepared for the reality of living as a holy community we must read it.” (Illustration: How many of my friends and classmates are no longer in ministry?)

II. But Then God Has A Private Word With Moses… (31:15-22)

1. It is not a pleasant word (as Peterson says with great understatement). Again Peterson paraphrases it well for us: “And one more thing Moses – everything is about to fall to pieces; these people can’t wait until you’re out of here so they can dive into the orgiastic sex-and-fertility religion of the Canaanites culture. So write out one last message that can be read after you are dead – make it a song so the children can learn it and will be able to pick up the pieces and recover this holy community that you started and that you have served so faithfully and well these forty years.” Wow! What a word! (Packer illustration)

2. Moses dies knowing that, from a human perspective, he was a failure. “He dies, by all human accounting, a failure, and knowing that he is a failure, and knowing that everything he has worked for in leading, training, and praying for this community, will unravel as soon as the people enter Canaan. It is a familiar story for readers of scripture, even though frequently suppressed. What does this mean? It means that we have to revise our ideas of the holy community to conform to what is revealed in scripture. It means that we cannot impose our paradisiacal visions of hanging out with lovely, upbeat, and beautiful people when we enter a Christian congregation. It means that God’s way of working with us in community has virtually nothing to do with the world’s idea of getting things done, of what ‘works’ and what doesn’t. It means that God hasn’t changed his modus operandi of choosing the “low and despised in the world” (1Cor 1:28) to form His community.”
3. What do we expect a church or Christian community to look and feel like? What is success in ministry? We must be rid of our silly romantic notions about church and community! The Bible never promises the kind of community you are looking for. Community is not a commodity, it is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread and going together to Jesus to get it.

“Too often the concept of community is perceived merely in terms of a feeling of coziness with God or compatibility with other members of the congregation. To reduce the importance of genuine community on the part of God’s people to such emotions or sentiments is terribly destructive. Often the result is the formation of an elitist “in” group or narcissism that takes the focus off God… [C]ontemporary images of community… emphasize “sameness, closeness, warmth, and comfort. Difference, distance, conflict, and sacrifice are alien to this approach and therefore are to be avoided at all costs. Modern communities maintain a façade of unity and harmony by eliminating the strange and cultivating the familiar, by suppressing dissimilarity and emphasizing agreement... Those who are strange – other than we are – are either excluded or quickly made like us.” The results are homogeneous communities of retreat where persons must be protected from one another as well as from outsiders, and where reality is suppressed and denied due to fear and anxiety. Community in the Biblical sense is more open to the realities of differences, more openly gracious to all, more deliberate, an act of the will. It does not depend upon feelings of affection. In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community together with people whom we don’t like so that we learn the real meaning of agape – that intelligent, purposeful love directed toward another’s need which comes first from God and then flows through us to our neighbor. To develop a community that practices Biblical principles is very difficult in this technologically efficient society. It takes a lot of work and time, sacrifice and commitment.” Marva Dawn

III. The End Of The Moses Story Leave Us Longing For More

1. Even Moses, as great as He was, and as powerfully as the Lord used him, wasn’t enough. This is the message that all the Bible characters preach to us – contrary to what some children’s Bible story Bibles, and too many churches teach. If we are tempted to think that any human could deliver us – Moses would have been then one, but the way the story ends forces us to look for someone else.

2. Jesus is the real Deliverer whose death looked like a total failure. If you had been there watching Jesus hanging on a cross you would have concluded, like everyone else watching Him, that His life and mission had come to a complete failure. God had abandoned Him, all of his disciples except one – and a couple of women – had fled too. Martin Luther called this the “theology of the cross” and it is vital for us to understand – when it looks like God is doing nothing, often he is doing His most powerful work! We need to remember this to understand the cross – and we need it to understand the Christian life, and what it means to serve Him.

3. What are the implications of all of this for how we think about our calling to take up Jesus’ mission? My friend Steve Malone, a former RUF campus minister at Auburn put it well several years ago, “What is the normal Christian life? What are we hoping to see cultivated in people? We are constantly driving people to make a big splash. Once or twice a year, a group comes along with a plan to “take Auburn by storm”. There is always a lot of noise and clamor, a lot of labor and money spent, and for a moment everyone (the Christians at least) look up to see what’s going on. As quickly as it appears, it disappears. Some get excited and want to make more noise next year. But for the most part the noise fades and people go back to the business at hand.

And that is where the church ought to meet people, in the “business at hand”. The ordinary, mundane duties and experiences that make up the larger portion of our lives. Jesus said the whole sum of Christian living was loving God and loving our neighbor. Did He mean for us to work that out in an arena or in our minute by minute ordinary lives? The more difficult and yet truest and most meaningful spirituality is that which deals with Jesus in everything. The prophet Micah charges the people of God with spiritual falsehood because they are always making noise in the temple, and yet cheat in business. Their spirituality has nothing to do with life.

The church has a ministry of presence: being present in people’s lives, helping them see the graces of the gospel in all they are and do, being there when God works. What shape does a ministry of presence take? We’re to help people break out of poverty. We’re to help a man love his wife (and vice-versa) when she/he is unlovable. We’re to help a divorced woman take Christ as her husband and learn to deal with her hurt and loneliness. We’re to help her children with their anger and see the cross transform it to love. We’re to help a man or woman who feels lost in his/her work deal with the providence of God. We’re to help an exhausted mom glory in the thousand tasks God has called her to. We’re to help a man trapped in destructive sin find the cross and its healing power. We’re to help those who feel the futility of living find significance in the kingdom of God. We’re to help frantically busy people learn to pray. We’re to help the man or woman we work or live with see the joy and hope of the gospel and deal with their disdain for God and his people. We’re to help people share griefs and joys. We’re to feed people from the Word of God. We’re to teach them to open their lives to others. In other words, we help them “love God and love people” in the regular stuff of life.

The ministry of presence doesn’t sell well. It’s a little hard to measure. We’re not even sure what it looks like ourselves. It requires “dogged obedience and robust prayer”. But this is what it means to know God. When we think about evangelism and discipleship, we should think about meeting people where they live- in the “business at hand”. There we will find great struggles and messes, and there we will see the transforming graces of Christ. Many Christians will never notice or recognize this as ministry because it makes so little noise. So what. God brings extraordinary things out of the ordinary.”