

Touching God

Sermon for Eternity Sunday

Sermon Text: 34:1-8



Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. ⁴ And the Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you

shall not go over there." ⁵ So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, ⁶ and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. ⁷ Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated. ⁸ And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

Moses was left by himself in a basket as a small child. His mother was forced to leave him there so that he wasn't killed by the Egyptian soldiers. Moses didn't stay in the Nile River. He was saved by the Egyptian princess and later was a famous celebrity among the Egyptians. But God had other plans for him. He would lead his people out of captivity into the promised land. But that wasn't his most important legacy. Rather, his most important legacy was the 5 books of Moses, which are also called the Torah. God explained His Holy Will to us in these 5 books. That's why the translation of the name Torah is *God's Instructions*. Today, we read a portion from the last verses of the aforementioned Torah. And it's about Moses' death and burial. It is worth noting that Moses died alone! Just as he was left alone as a baby in the basket, he was alone on the day of his death. And yet that wasn't true. Moses wasn't alone. He was never alone. God was always with him both in his basket in the Nile River as well as in his last hours. Even more remarkable is that God supported the dying Moses and even personally touched him and buried him. This fact is even more remarkable because in Judaism, touching a dead person was generally considered unclean. If someone had come into contact with a dead body in any way, they had to perform many ritual cleansings before they could be taken back into the community. The fact that God touched Moses, who was dead, is so strange and unusual for Jews that some Jewish writer removed this part from the Old Testament. And yet, I think that this fact, that God touched Moses, who was dead, reveals an important mystery. If we turn back to the beginning of the 5 books of Moses, we find a similarly noteworthy Bible passage. There, God again touches people with His own hands. He forms Adam out of earth and Adam only becomes an actual person through God's hands. So the first lines of the Torah begin with God forming human life with His own hands. And the Torah ends with God putting man back into the ground. Everything begins and ends in God's hands. For many people, this is hard to understand. And that's why they try to change these texts or interpret them differently. For example, it's said that God didn't actually touch the people but that one must understand these events

symbolically. But that is a mistake. Because when God doesn't touch us physically in our corporeality, we are forced to always keep God far away from us. God is then only ever seen from a distance, as not involving Himself in our lives, and also as not caring what happens with our lives. Or as some people say: "God is responsible for the soul but we must care for the body ourselves." No, that is wrong. Jesus also said that God even counts each hair on our bodies. The Torah tells us: Without God's hand, there is no body! And that isn't just highlighted there. Again and again, we can read in the Bible that God is physically present in our lives. For example, it is written in Psalm 139 that God already knew us when we were just embryos. In the book of Isaiah, we read that God had to touch Isaiah's lips before he became a prophet. The importance of our body becomes clearest when God, through Jesus Christ, assumes a human body and becomes vulnerable. Then Jesus also physically went to people throughout His life here on earth and laid His hands on them and physically healed them of their illnesses. That's why it's also important that we understand our relationship to God physically. For the same reason, we must physically be present at our baptism. We can't perform a baptism online. Another person also can't be baptized in our place. The water must flow over our own body. And God's name must be spoken over our body. And so we are physically united with God. Similarly, an online church service is only a weak supplement of an actual church service. God wants to meet us personally and physically. That's why he wants us to take the body and blood of Jesus Christ physically. Ultimately, God will also bodily raise us from the dead and we will see God with our own eyes.

In the story about Moses' death, we see all of that happening too. God attends to Moses in the last hours of his life. He takes him by the hand and shows him the wonderful land in which the people of Israel will later live. He allowed Moses a glimpse into the future even though Moses himself has no share in this future. Or does he have a share in it by having a portion in God? In Psalm 73:26 it becomes clear that our portion in God is the most important thing that we have. *"²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."* In Moses' death, we see what the psalm talks about happen in a very practical way. Moses started his life alone and ended his life alone – and yet God was always a part of his life. Especially in Moses' death, God is very near and He even gets His hands dirty as He dug a hole and places Moses' body there. That's how physically and real God wants to be there for us. And if God wants to be so close to us, I know that death can't separate me from God's love. The story of Moses' death is especially important for us because today, we think about all those who died this past year. We also think about those who died from Corona. Some had to die alone like Moses and had no access to family or their loved ones. They were literally left alone. And yet they weren't alone if they were with God. Oh, if only we could all die as well as Moses, knowing that God holds us in His hand, that God is my portion even when everything else disappears! Oh, if only we could live every breath with the knowledge that God is in and with us. That's exactly why each day we pray the famous prayer of Martin Luther: "For into Your hands I commend myself!" The promises of God were incomprehensible to Moses because he had no part in them. And yet through God, he had a full share in God's promises. It's like that for us all. We only have a short lifetime in this world. Our life has a beginning and an end. But through Jesus, we are drawn into the great promises of God that have no end. We receive a portion of God and of His world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in World War 2, wrote about this part of Deuteronomy in the last days before his death. For him, Moses' death was a preparation of his own death. Moses was enveloped in death and yet he was allowed to see God's salvation from afar. In the same way, shortly before his death, Bonhoeffer was allowed to live full of trust that God's promises apply to him too. He writes: *"When the night of death envelops me, I see*

Your salvation fulfilled from afar. Holy Land, I have seen you, beautiful and wonderful as an adorned Bride!" Amen.