

“Hope Endures” *Deuteronomy 34*

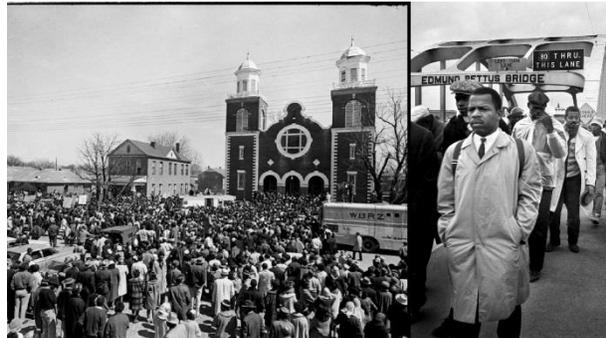


David Letterman and John Lewis
November 2017

This past week I watched the Netflix show, “*My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman*,” his first interview was with former President Barack Obama. During the episode, Letterman shared a video of himself and 78 year old Congressman John Lewis, walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama while reflecting back upon the events in March 1965 that made the bridge infamous during the Civil Rights

Movement. At the time less than 2% of African Americans were on the voting rolls despite making up 30% of the population; a 54 mile march to the state capitol in Montgomery had been organized to demonstrate for voter rights.

The protesters started at the Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma and Lewis, just twenty five years old, was there carrying his backpack with an apple, an orange, toothpaste, toothbrush, and a couple of books in case he was arrested and put in jail.



They began walking along the city sidewalks towards the Edmund Pettus Bridge which they had to cross in order to get to Montgomery. When they reached the halfway point at the arc of the bridge, the marchers caught sight of the State Troopers and officers of the local sheriff on the other side, waiting for them with their weapons. Lewis recalled the moment saying,

“I saw death; I thought I was going to die. It was some force that was just pushing us on... We had been taught not to be afraid, to be determined, to be orderly, peaceful and to abide by the philosophy of nonviolence.”

And so they walked on and when they got to the other side, the law enforcement officers gave them a two-minute warning to turn around but before that time was up they attacked them with nightsticks and teargas. 50 of them ended up in the hospital, including young John Lewis, on that day which became known as Bloody Sunday.



It is the last Sunday in our series following the life of Moses, where we have seen hope born, hope tested, and hope named. Our scripture passage today is from the concluding chapter of Deuteronomy which wraps up not only his life, but an incredible saga. To put it lightly, Moses has been through a lot. Barely surviving state legislated infanticide at birth, becoming a fugitive of the law after killing an Egyptian, leading one of the largest civil disobedience movements in history by invoking some seriously insane plagues, wandering in literal and metaphorical circles in the wilderness with a group of traumatized people who had an infuriating habit of sabotaging him while he tried to bring them to freedom in a land that the Lord had promised but everyone doubted actually existed; and that is just the short list.

If this were a typical Hollywood movie, this would be the point in which the tide would turn and the battle-scarred Moses would finally ride off into the promise land (with a gorgeous sunset in the background of course), victorious at last. If anybody deserves to see the fruit of his labor, it is Moses who has been through hell and then some. As we read the text, this happy ending seems tantalizingly close—the scene is set as he climbs his way up Mt. Nebo to get a better view. Once he arrives at the summit, he discovers the Lord waiting for him there. The great “I AM” then proceeds to show him the detailed contours of the promise land, pointing out Dan to the north, the great sea to the west, the palm trees in the valley of Jericho. It is amazing, and Moses though age 120 years old, can see it clearly with his unimpaired eyes and unabated vigor—what a vision to behold!

While he is taking in the grandeur of it all, the Lord reminds him that this is the land promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those famous ancestors who came long before Moses was on the scene! It is a statement meant to provoke both awe and humility because it places him on the long generational line of his people, spanning in opposite and infinite directions of his own lifeline. He realizes that he has played a part of something much greater and beyond himself, and that vision is a gift. All those years of struggle first in Egypt and then in the desert have not been for naught; his lifework has helped build a bridge to the Promise Land which he can finally see from the top of Mt. Nebo. But instead of making his way down to the other side, the Lord says to him, ***“I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there,”*** and then, Moses dies at the Lord’s command never having set his own foot in the Promise Land. Rather than a scene of celebration against a gorgeous setting sun, the background is filled with the sounds of weeping and deep mourning of the Israelites. It is not the ending we expect nor want for this story.

But oh, how honest it rings and how truthfully it paints the messiness of how life unfolds. Even though Moses was an exemplary servant of God, he did not get a perfect finale where all the loose ends were tied up neatly. If anyone could be pissed off about not getting to see the fruit of his labor, it was Moses; yet that is not what happened because somewhere along the way, he came to an understanding of the larger picture—he had a vision of a hope that endured beyond even his own death because he knew that the story did not begin or end with him.

So even as Moses dies and the people are in grief, the very next verses in Deuteronomy 34 tell us about young Joshua, whom Moses had been cultivating to run the next leg of the journey. Though Moses did not get to enter the promise land himself, he had been paving the way for others to eventually get there. That is the triumphant story we read in the next book in the bible, Joshua, when the Israelites finally enter the promise land. Like the stories that come before and after, it is still full of hard and messy things along the way. Because as the story did not end with Moses, it does not end with Joshua either; it continues on that generational line that

stretches not only backwards to our spiritual ancestors, but forwards to us with a hope that has and will endure all the while long.

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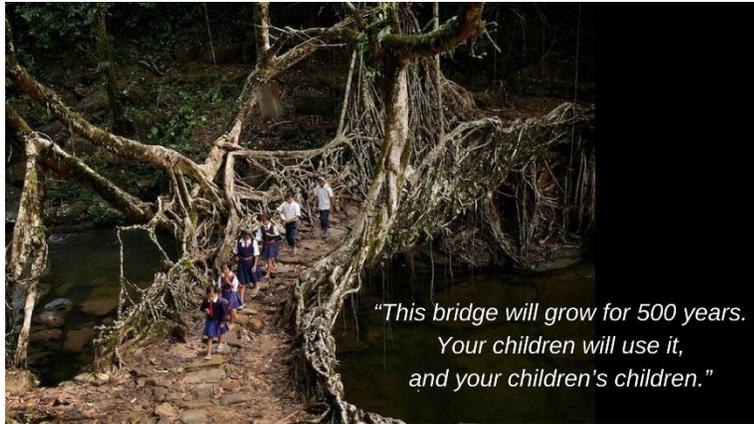


During the walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Letterman asked Lewis what was on the other side at the end of the march from Selma to Montgomery that he and the other protesters were walking for. Lewis responded, ***“The vote, Barack Obama. If it hadn’t been for the march from Selma to Montgomery, there probably would be no Barack Obama as President of the United States.”*** Lewis was one of the few people from that Bloody Sunday in 1965 who lived long enough to see the historic inauguration in 2008 of America’s first black president, as many of those marchers from Selma to Montgomery, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. only got to glimpse the promise land from afar. But they had the vision and understanding that they were part of something bigger than themselves, and it was that hope which endured before and beyond them that paved the way for others who would follow in the coming years. After hearing Lewis’s statement, Obama responded, ***“John Lewis is absolutely right, that he and all those other folks who marched carried me across that bridge; they carried America across that bridge.”***

As the story did not end with Moses or Joshua, it does not end with Lewis or Obama, for we have inherited a hope that endures in both directions, behind and ahead of us—which is good news because there is so much more to be done! Next month, Pres House is hosting [Nonviolence Training Workshops](#), led by facilitators from Eastpoint Peace Academy who ground themselves in the philosophy of Kingian Nonviolence, the same philosophy John Lewis was trained in as a young adult. On the eve of his assassination, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis, Tennessee to support sanitation workers who were on strike demanding better working conditions. After giving his last speech, he went back to his room at the Lorraine Motel and told one of his closest advisors, Bernard Lafayette Jr., that the next movement they were going to have would be to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence. Just hours later he was killed, and those words became King’s final marching orders that Lafayette took to heart as he began training thousands of others in the ways of nonviolence to work towards peace and reconciliation.

One of the core visions that Eastpoint Peace Academy has is a 250 year work plan to achieve the beloved community that Rev. King dreamt about; when I first heard that, I laughed aloud—250 years! I am not always sure of what my plan is for tomorrow! But it is a 250 year plan because they know it will take a multi-generational effort to address the issues of poverty, racism, and conflict in our country.





They share the source of their inspiration from the living root bridges in Meghalaya, India. In this region which is one of the wettest spots on earth, the streams and rivers become dangerous torrents that are impassable by foot during the monsoon season. A couple of hundred years ago, villagers devised a solution so that people could safely cross these threatening passes.

Tending the roots of the trees

growing by the rivers, they have patiently nurtured them into living bridges that can support a human's weight. It can take 15-20 years for these bridges to reach both river banks, and of course it needs continuous cultivation to grow and last. As one elder explained to his young niece, ***"This bridge will grow for 500 years. Your children will use it, and your children's children."*** Across the span of time and over the threats from a raging river, these living bridges are a powerful symbol of the hope that endures, generation after generation.

Certainly this hope is not always so dramatic as the stories of Moses or John Lewis, but that does not mean it is insignificant. Did you know that it was students and young adults from years ago at Pres House who are responsible for us having the real plates and silverware we use for dinner each week? Because you see, for many years we used paper plates and plastic cutlery every Sunday, throwing them out and producing a massive amount of waste each week. The community here began to question what it would take to change this and learned that not only would it take money to buy permanent flatware and an industrial dishwasher, it would take commitment and time to make sure they were washed and maintained every time they were used. And so they donated their own money and they created a system for volunteers to make a little step for environmental justice. Most of those people never got to eat a meal at Pres House on the real plates, because by the time everything was put in place, their time in Madison was done. But they knew their efforts were part of a longer trajectory which would benefit the generations to come after them—you; the story continues beyond them. In the two and half years since the plan was completed, over 10,000 plates, forks, and more have been saved from the landfill.

Many of you are also involved in different organizations here on campus and in the larger community working to close the inequality gap for women, raising awareness about the poor in Appalachia, advocating for policies that remember the differently abled, and more. Much of the time you will not see the direct fruit of your labor, but you are part of something bigger than yourself that has come before you and will continue after.

Have you considered how your own life is part of God's greater, unfolding story? Do you know that you have a powerful inheritance from your spiritual ancestors which has been passed on from generation to generation, and that you have a role in tending the living bridge which spans behind and ahead of you? Yes, there can be danger, messiness, and uncertainty raging just beneath our feet, that much is clear as we look around our world. But there is more than that to all of our stories, for we are inheritors of a hope that endures even beyond death; we are part of a living bridge that continues on to the promise land.

I want to share the closing of Rev. King's last sermon, given the day before his assassination and when he gave his final marching orders to continue the work for the beloved community. Though he was just 39 years old, King seemed to sense his end was near and it was as if God's spirit comforted and strengthened him through this text from Deuteronomy 34. Listen to his [words](#) (1:20-2:30):

“Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

May his final words remind us that hope indeed, endures. Amen.