

Your Legacy  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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I watched this great story last week on 60 Minutes where they interviewed two co-authors of a new biography on Vincent Van Gogh. The book, called *Van Gogh: The Life*, challenges many of the traditional views art historians have held for years about the artist. The brief outline of his life as we know it now is: "unappreciated Dutch genius who in a fit of madness cut off his ear and later killed himself." [1] But Steven Naifeh and Greg Smith, both winners of the Pulitzer Prize, spent ten years researching and delving into the mind of this troubled genius and they had access to family correspondence never published before.

The authors believe that there was a level of genius within Van Gogh's madness that has thus far not been taken seriously enough and furthermore that he didn't kill himself. The authors posit that he was shot by a villager, probably on accident, and that Van Gogh died trying to protect his killer. When police actually came to interview Van Gogh on his deathbed, they asked him if he killed himself and his response was, "I believe so . . . don't accuse anybody else." [2]

This interview was fascinating, with all the Van Gogh paintings displayed and explained; with the inside information on his family life, and a glimpse into the heartbreakingly sad life Van Gogh led. I knew that he died thinking of himself as a failure, I had heard his lament before, "As a painter, I will never amount to anything important. I am absolutely sure of it." [3] He was laughed out of art school, couldn't hold a job, even tried to be a minister like his father and the congregation found him too weird and kicked him out of the ministry!

The authors at one point said, "He basically is a man who lived to be 37 years old and never really had a friend . . . Of all of his subjects, portraits were definitely his favorite. The reason was really less artistic than it was emotional. And that was out of his loneliness, one of his few ways to connect with people was to paint somebody." [4] In nine years he turned out more than 1,000 paintings and 1,000 drawings, but he died thinking of himself as a failure, with no friends except for perhaps his younger brother, Theo, who had supported him his whole life.

I think the silver lining in his story is that his paintings make so many people happy today. His legacy has endured, he has proven himself wrong—he did amount to be an important painter. The interview showed people traveling to visit his grave—he's buried in a simple plot next to Theo in France. One tourist from Japan even played Don McLean's famous song, "Starry, Starry Night" on his phone to honor the artist. Van Gogh just didn't get to have that success and appreciation while he was alive, and that's what's so sad.

Now the death of Moses has always been sad to me too. Just like Van Gogh didn't get to live and see the success of his art, Moses doesn't get to live and enter the Promised Land. Moses stands on a mountain in the presence of God, he looks out into the valley, the Promised Land spread out before him, the land that was promised to his ancestors and their descendents who he's led through the wilderness for forty years. The people who complained and argued, who made a Golden Calf and break the commandments and rebel and fight and never seem to appreciate what he's trying to do for them, what he already did for them.

And they get to go into this Promised Land at last and he has to lie down on the mountain and die. Couldn't God have just thrown him a bone? Given him a break? Let him have just one day walking around in this land where he's journeyed for miles to get his people, God's people, to arrive in?

This is the kind of Bible passage that can keep you up at night, questioning what's up with God anyway? Because this just seems mean and unnecessary. God says, "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

But here's the thing, did you notice that Moses doesn't have a speaking part? Not one line. Moses dies in the land of Moab at God's command, God tells him all this stuff, and Moses doesn't resist, doesn't argue, doesn't protest, doesn't complain, doesn't say, "Hey, God, no fair!" He just accepts his fate and dies on the mountain, gets buried, and the people mourn for the loss of this great man.

There have been many people who I've seen this happen to, this complete and total surrender and dying in peace. I visited a man sometimes who was 101—I would often find him sitting in his chair listening to classical music on the radio and his pictures on the wall looked like they could be in a museum. When he was playing football in high school, they still had those crazy leather helmets, the type of historic helmets you see on display at the Football Hall of Fame. And I asked him once, "I know you get this all the time, but what's it really like to be over 100 years old?"

He looked at me and said, "Honestly, it's lonely. My wife has died, all my siblings have died, most of my friends have died, my parents are dead, and well, my kids are wonderful and I have a great life here, but it would be okay to go and meet the Lord." He ended up dying at 102, living a good, long life like Moses and he seemed to die feeling like he had lived well and had done what he could.

Moses seems to die in peace and probably in some contentment too. That's what makes his death more bearable than Vincent Van Gogh's for example. Yes, he didn't get to enter the Promised Land, but he got his people there. His hard work and his years of striving, his fight with Pharaoh, they all paid off. And God lets Moses see that, Moses sees the Promised Land before he dies, and he knows that he succeeded in leading his people there.

That's why there's this amazing ending to his story, actually the ending of the entire Torah: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt." [5] What a wonderful way to go out when you really think about, being praised as the greatest prophet Israel had ever witnessed, someone who was unequalled in the signs and wonders God allowed him to do, the man responsible for setting his people free and leading them back home.

Many people have been grieving the loss of Steve Jobs in our country. Just this week there was a private memorial in his honor in California, two weeks after his death. And there Tim Cook, the new CEO of Apple, vowed to carry on the legacy and Jobs' consistent desire for excellence. That's part of the reality of the death of a leader—needing people to carry on your teachings, the things you stood for after you're gone.

Cook vowed to keep up the tradition of excellence at Apple. And again, I think maybe that can give folks some peace of mind. You won't be forgotten, and what's more, we're going to continue on with the things you've taught us, we're going to keep doing all the things you told us to do. Your work and your life have not been in vain.

In Deuteronomy, we get introduced to Joshua, "who was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him." It's Joshua who now has the responsibility of leading the people onto the Promised Land, taking over where Moses left off. And he'll also do some pretty amazing things for the people of Israel.

Over all, this passage points to the importance of living life to the fullest while you can, to saying the things you need to say, to doing the things you need to do because none of us will live forever. And this is exactly what Randy Pausch, the professor at Carnegie Mellon who wrote the book *The Last Lecture* after he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, the same type of cancer that claimed the life of Steve Jobs, did in his book just recently. He begins the book by saying that professors are often asked to give a "last lecture." Professors are "asked to consider their demise and ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can't help but mull the same questions: What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?"[6]

I think that the life and death of Moses points to the contentment that can come when you know that you've lived a good life and given a legacy to those who will be here after you're gone, and you know people will carry on without you. Van Gogh would have died more at peace if he had just known that his life and his work were important, that he would be appreciated some day.

But I want to end with the words of Steve Jobs, given during his Commencement Address at Stanford in 2005, words that can inspire us all as we live out our days: "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."[7] Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760.shtml)

[2] [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760\\_page6.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760_page6.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody)

[3] [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760\\_page7.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760_page7.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody)

[4] [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760\\_page2.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/16/60minutes/main20120760_page2.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody)

[5] Deuteronomy 34:10-11.

[6] Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*, 3.

[7] Steve Jobs, Commencement Address, Stanford—2005, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>