

Exodus 33:12-23
October 19, 2008

South Plains
189th Anniversary

Pilgrimage and Passion

189 years. Happy Birthday South Plains and best wishes. Anniversaries can help us stay rooted in the best of our past and can point us toward a better future. Just for fun, I looked at what else was happening in 1819 when this church was founded.

Most of us know that the University of Virginia also marks 1819 as its founding date. The State of Virginia created an endowment for the new university of \$15,000 and Thomas Jefferson made chapel attendance voluntary at UVA.

It was not a good time for new ventures. The country was afflicted with what became known as the panic of 1819. The War of 1812 had placed a burden on taxpayers. Other international events contributed to the economic crisis which included some familiar problems: many banks failed; unemployment rose as the economy slumped; and a lot of people could not make payments on the loans they had taken out to buy real estate. What else is new? Despite these negatives, the John Rogers' family set aside in 1819 some of their land for a Presbyterian Church.

The point of that backward glance is just to say that in 2008 we are not the first Presbyterians who have

faced the challenge of expanding the ministry of the church in difficult times. We will move ahead with construction of Kirk Hall. God's people seldom enjoy the luxury of watching God do great things with effort on our part. The pilgrimage of South Plains has always called for passionate faith.

Exodus 33 provides a good illustration of how God helps his people when times are tough, when faith falters, and when the obstacles to completing the pilgrimage threaten failure. After the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea and escaped slavery in Egypt, they faced two more threats. God had promised them a land of their own, but in order to get there, they first had to navigate a wilderness and at the same time learn how to be faithful people of God. These two challenges become the themes of their pilgrimage: getting through the wilderness and staying faithful.

The wilderness threatened them with starvation and thirst. No matter how many times the Lord provided quail and manna and water from the rock, they still doubted God. They could not trust God for all they needed. They had to learn that trusting the Lord was the key to faithful living.

By the time we get to Exodus 33, the people have whined and complained all the way to Mt. Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments. When Moses was slow coming down the mountain, the people lost faith and worshiped a golden calf, an image they made

themselves in direct contradiction of the second commandment. As punishment for such flagrant failure to trust and obey God, the 40 year pilgrimage through the wilderness will be without the direct presence of God. He will not forsake his people, but he will withdraw, much as a parent might say to a wayward college student, “You’re always welcome to come home and we’ll always love you. But we’re not going to keep bailing you out of jail and begging the school to let you back in. You’re on your own.”

Moses didn’t like that arrangement. He had never wanted the job in the first place. Now he lays it on the line with the Lord. “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here (15).” Moses knew that without the Lord, Israel was sunk. And, our situation today is no different. We’ve got some money in the bank. We have the promise of a loan and some pledges. We have a wonderful site plan and blueprints. And, one day we will have all the necessary approvals from Albemarle County to begin construction. But, if the past month means anything, it means that events beyond our control can upset the best plans. Without the presence of the Lord to guide us, to strengthen us, and to rescue us when needed, we cannot realize all our hopes and dreams.

So Moses asks for some assurance from the Lord. He wants to know that God will go with him as he leads the people. The assurance he asks for is simple: “Show me your glory I pray (28).”

The glory of God is a sacred thing. God is invisible. We cannot see or touch the deity we worship. Scripture is very clear about that. Even when God is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, what people see is an ordinary human being. Nonetheless, the glory of God, the penumbra of God, the aura surrounding God occasionally will appear. This glory is usually associated with light – the fire and cloud that led Israel; the fire on Mt. Carmel when Elijah laid a sacrifice to God on the altar; and the transfiguration when Jesus was clothed in light before Peter, James and John. Moses is asking to see the glory of the Lord of hosts, the transcendent holiness of the Almighty, the mystery that is ineffable and incomprehensible, but at the same time irrefutable proof of God’s presence. If Moses can see the glory of God, he believes he will be able to carry out his God-given task, this pilgrimage to the Promise Land.

I believe many of us share Moses’ desire. We would like to experience God in a way that we can never forget. We’d like an event to anchor our faith forever. I have a friend who is a big fan of Tennessee football. Every year he buys season tickets to go to Knoxville where he sits with 105,000 other fans as the UT team charges into Neyland Stadium. In 1997, his team fell behind early in a critical game. As the clock ticked down in the fourth quarter, when all seemed lost, he prayed to God that somehow UT might win. He even promised to go on a mission trip to Latin America if only they could win that game. Against all expectations, there was a fumble and Tennessee recovered and went on to win that

game and the national championship. Now my friend is well-educated and has a fairly sophisticated faith. He knew that was a silly prayer. But, to this day, he knows he is in debt. He owes God a mission trip and he cannot forget that miraculous game.

Moses wanted more than miracle. He wanted to see God's own self in all God's glory. And, God said, No. God would give Moses what he needed to do his job, but not the glorious certainty he craved. Moses would have to live by faith. What he asked for was not safe. No one can see God and live.

Nevertheless, God gave himself to Moses. He told Moses his name, the name by which Israel forever prays. In our Bibles, that name is written in small capital letters as THE LORD. As heirs of Israel, we also can call on the name of the Lord. Names are important. God tells Moses that he knows Moses by name. They were on intimate terms.

What's more, instead of showing his blinding glory, which would have overwhelmed Moses, God shows his goodness, his grace, his mercy. The commandments are part of the divine goodness, but I believe the deepest truth about the Lord is revealed in a statement repeated several times in scripture. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy (19)."

In verse 13, Moses says, "If I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways," show me the kind of God you are. This is the character of the Lord we worship, full of grace and mercy. Generous and forgiving. Kind and loving.

I believe that is all we need to know, and all we need to see of God. We want more. We want absolute assurance, a kind of foolproof guarantee that God is on our side no matter what. It would be nice to know in this particular stewardship season that we can make our gifts to God with a divine guarantee that we won't need that money for something else. It would be reassuring to the session to know that God will move heaven and earth in order to fulfill all our hopes for Kirk Hall. It would make us feel better if some cataclysmic revelation burned into our minds the conviction that South Plains is the apple of God's eye. But God doesn't make those kind of promises or offer those kind of guarantees.

Instead, we are told simply to give the state its due and to give God what is God's. We are reminded that if God clothes the lilies of the field in beauty, God will much more clothe you and me. We are promised that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus because Jesus has promised, "I am with you always." Isaiah tells us that even when we say, "The Lord has forsaken me," God answers, "I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (49:14, 16)."

189 years and the best is yet to come. 189 years of God's faithful guidance through good times and bad. God has been gracious and merciful to South Plains and good to you and me. In my desk drawer, I keep a little stack of business cards that I have been given by various people who want me to know their phone number or their email or their company's name. I have my own business cards that I give away for the same purposes. You probably have a similar system of exchanging cards like that. Some cards I never use. Others I refer to often. Somewhere in heaven, God has an enormous stack of cards, or more likely a hard drive with infinite storage where our contact information can be immediately retrieved. Your name and mine are there. South Plains Presbyterian Church is there.

God does not forget us. Even if we don't see the glory of the Lord until the very end, we can know that God goes with us every step of the way. We can be sure of God's presence because we are known and loved; and we have received grace and mercy until our cup overflows. It is overflowing today with 189 years.