

Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
October 26, 2008

South Plains  
Reformation Sunday

### A Place to Fill and a Story to Write

On the border between South Dakota and Nebraska, the Cattlecheck Ranch stretches across the hills just south of the Pine Ridge Tribal Reservation. It was here that the parents of Crazy Horse, the great Lakota warrior, brought the body of their son after he was killed at Fort Robinson. Perhaps they feared someone would desecrate his body. In any case, they intentionally did not mark the place of burial. No one knows where the body of Crazy Horse rests today. Nevertheless, in the 130 years after his death, Lakota and other Native Americans come regularly to the Cattlecheck Ranch for a vision quest, or a fast or a sacred dance.

Because there is no marker, no memorial, no shrine, all of that area is available to be filled with the hopes and dreams of those who carry forward the traditions of the Lakota tribe. The openness of the land is appropriate because the story of the Lakota is unfinished and waits for other chapters to be written. In the same way, Moses' grave on Mt. Nebo is left unmarked because the Israelites have a land to settle and a story to write. His final resting place is unmarked because his pilgrimage is unfinished. Israel does not return to Mt. Nebo to memorialize Moses. They have his work to do in Canaan.

Our 5 ½ acres at South Plains Presbyterian Church is not a memorial to the past, although some see this beautiful sanctuary as little more than a picture book church, a decoration for the rural landscape of Keswick. Our history is unfinished. We have a place on our corner of Black Cat and the Louisa Roads to fill with praises to the Lord and people to serve Christ. We are called to write a new chapter in the story of God's people: "South Plains in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

There are two ways we can write our chapter. We might compose a sigh of resignation that says, "Lord, we've done all we can manage to do, but in this economy and with our limited time and resources, we'll be satisfied just to get Kirk Hall out of the ground." That's one possible scenario. Or, we can write a rousing cheer, an overture with trumpet fanfare that says, "This is just the beginning of your work, Lord; and we know you're going to do more than we can imagine. Praise God we've seen this much and we believe more is coming."

These two alternatives are represented in two different ways to read the last chapter of Deuteronomy. One reading sees this final scene in Moses' life as a sigh of resignation on the part of a great leader who is denied the chance to cross over Jordan and die in the Promise Land. Indeed, earlier in Deuteronomy, we can find passages where Moses' failure to enter Canaan is God's punishment for some sin committed by either Moses or the people in the wilderness. According to this reading, the Lord prevents Moses from setting foot in Canaan so

that Moses ends his career with a melancholy longing for the place he can only see at a distance.

But, nothing in Deuteronomy 34 indicates that the Lord is unhappy with his friend. This is simply the quiet conclusion of Moses' faithful walk with the Lord who called him from the burning bush decades before. The responsibilities of leadership which he assumed so reluctantly are over. He has completed his task of bringing the people out of Egypt and to the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He has received the Commandments and handed them on to Israel, interpreting them in the context of their new freedom. He has interceded on Israel's behalf when they disobeyed the Lord. His part of the journey is concluded, not with a simple report of his death, but with one final experience of intimate fellowship with the God he has followed or years.

In this second reading, Moses is looking forward, not with regret, but with anticipation. I believe this is a scene of triumph with Moses standing on the top step to receive the gold medal of a winner. He is confident that what God has done in the past is prelude to greater things. If you will permit me a little literary license, I believe we can know how Moses responded to the Lord as they stood together on the top of Mt. Nebo; and I would suggest that Moses' prayer is an appropriate prayer for us in this stewardship season.

After God shows Moses the Promise Land and tells him he will not cross over into that land, I imagine Moses answering with the words of Psalm 90. If you look at Psalm 90 you will see in most Bibles a title in italics, "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God." The italics indicate that scholars are not certain the titles for various psalms are part of the original text, but they are ancient enough to be included. The psalm is in three parts. Part One says,

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all  
Generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

This is Moses' affirmation of faith. And, it's the faith of this congregation as well. God has been our dwelling place generation after generation. Before the Southwest Mountains were brought forth, you are God. The economy may be in trouble right now. But, the work of God is not governed by what the market will bear. Our Creator was in business long before Wall Street and will still be creating long after the last bell has rung.

Part Two of the psalm recognizes the limits of human life and the limitations of sinful human beings:

You turn us back to dust,  
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."  
For a thousand years in your sight

are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.  
You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.  
The days of our life are seventy years,  
or perhaps eighty if we are strong;  
even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger?  
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

Verse 12 concludes this reality check with a brief petition  
that we often hear at funerals:

So teach us to count our days  
That we may gain a wise heart.

But the prayer does not end with a sigh. It ends  
with a series of imperatives demanding God's help. This

is the real Moses arguing with the Almighty on behalf of  
his disobedient people, holding God accountable to keep  
his promises, confidently trusting in God's favor or grace:

Turn, O Lord! How long?

Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted  
us,

and as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and prosper for us the work of our hands –

O prosper the work of our hands!

That's the attitude of Moses, confident in the Lord.

What will be the attitude of our prayers as we fill out  
those Estimate of Giving cards? Every fall we mark  
another milestone when our session gets ready to put  
together another budget. We survey the territory of the  
coming year, estimate utility costs, project mission needs  
for the work of our congregation and for the work of the  
benevolent causes we support. At the same time, we as  
a congregation must be asking ourselves this key  
personal question: "What would God have us give to  
God's mission through this church in the coming year?"  
The answer to that question goes on the Estimate of

Giving cards that we fill out on November 9<sup>th</sup> and place on the communion table.

This year, filling out that card for 2009 will be more difficult for some of us because of the economy. A man who is not in this church told me his retirement plans changed dramatically when Wachovia Bank was sold. As with Moses, the earthly goal of our career may be receding into the distance.

Notice that Moses is not asking for more time for himself. He is asking the Lord to prosper the work he has done, in other words, asking that the journey he started will be completed by the grace of God.

What counts, what really counts in Moses' life and in yours and mine is that Moses knew the Lord face to face. I don't think it means he saw the full glory of the Lord, nor does it refer to the mighty acts of God witnessed by Moses. It means he was the servant of the Lord. He talked with the Lord and followed in his paths. He was not perfect. He gets angry and petulant with the Lord. He refuses to accept God's judgment on the Israelites, and he argues God out of abandoning Israel.

If we want to know how to serve God well, we can look of Moses. If we want the Lord to know us face to face, we need to be prepared to fight with Lord and demand that God keep his promises to South Plains through good times and bad. We need to make God listen by beating on the doors of heaven.

The language of Psalm 90 is a little old fashioned, but it communicates:

O prosper the work of our hands!

“Confirm the work that we do,” says the *Message*. Make it count for something, not by letting us enjoy the credit and the rewards ourselves, but make it meaningful in your kingdom, Lord.

That's our prayer, the source of our confidence, the reason for our praise and the foundation for our giving: the grace of God. Let us pray.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,

And prosper for us the work of our hands –  
O prosper the work of our hands. Amen.