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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Life We Share

(Stewardship Commitment Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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 the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain -- that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Zoar.

The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command.

God buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.

Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired, and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him, and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

[1]Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
[2]Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

[3]You turn us back to dust
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”
[4]For a thousand years in your sight

are like yesterday when it is past
or like a watch in the night.
[5]You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
[6]in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

[13]Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
[14]Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
[15]Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us
and as many years as we have seen evil.
[16]Let your work be manifest to your servants
and your glorious power to their children.
[17]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!

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

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The Life We Share

When we first enrolled our kids at the small Montessori school near our house, we got a survey asking how we, as parents, would like to be involved. The choices were things like helping with the carline, chaperoning field trips, baking for bake sales, you get the idea.

After a few years of filling out the survey and not being asked to do anything, I got an email asking if I would be willing to help with the carline two mornings a week. I have to admit that my first reaction was to wonder if I could come up with a reason to say no that would somehow make me look even better than if I said yes. When I couldn't think of a way, I reluctantly agreed and started showing up early two mornings a week to help get kids out of cars and into the building.

I'm not sure what I expected, but when I look back over the past few years, I'm struck by just how much that small job connected me to the school community. I started recognizing kids and learning their names. I got to know parents while trying to coax their children out of cars. I met other volunteers and discovered that it's not just my children who wait until the last minute to tell you about a project that's due. And when I show up, people seem glad to see me; I feel like I belong and have something to offer, even if it's just a willingness to stand in the rain and open car doors (though, let's be honest, on the coldest days, I make Adam go for me).

Like so many volunteer opportunities, I've received as much, if not more, than I've given. And in the process, I've become part of a community I had only orbited before. With Caleb at a new school, I'm not doing carline regularly this year. Now when I take Hannah to school, someone else opens the door.

There's something a little heartbreaking about the fact that Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land. He's come such a long way. At the age of 120, having gone head to head with Pharaoh, having met God on the mountain and received the Ten Commandments, having led the people through a lifetime of wandering in the wilderness, Moses now stands just outside the borders of the Promised Land. Spread before him is everything he has been working for, all that he has been journeying toward, the promise for which he has endured a life of contested leadership that he did not want.

He is so close—so close to walking his people over the finish line, so close to seeing his journey come to completion. And yet, this is where his journey will end. He has brought the people all this way, but someone else will lead them across.

At the same time, there is also something about this moment on the mountain, about the fact that God takes time to show Moses what he has been laboring toward, that Moses gets to die knowing the promise was real, that the people have arrived, that he has done the job for which God called him. I imagine that moment for Moses must have been both comforting and heartbreaking—his life has not been in vain, and yet this is a boundary he cannot cross. There is comfort in knowing that the people he loves will have the future God has promised. And there is heartbreak in knowing that he will not be there to see it.

It's curious to me that the text makes a point of telling us that Moses, while old, was still strong. His sight was unimpaired, his vigor unabated. This is not a life cut short, but neither is it a life exhausted. I wonder if Moses felt he could go on, that he had more to give.

There is something strange, in general, about the way the story is told. Moses stands on the mountain looking over the land, God reminds him of the promise, and then, almost without warning, Moses dies. Alone. And God buries him. There is something tender in that—God doing for Moses something we do for the people we love.

And then the story moves on. The people mourn, Joshua is ready to lead, and the Israelites prepare to continue their journey. But before the story ends, we're reminded once more that there will never be another Moses. The text seems determined to hold these truths together: Moses is still strong, and yet his life is ending. The people mourn Moses, and yet, Joshua is prepared to lead and the people are willing to follow him. There will never be another Moses, and yet, the people's journey continues without him.

It's part of what makes this story not just Moses's story, but our story as well. Because life is full of moments when we find ourselves faced with the fact that giving ourselves deeply to something or someone doesn't guarantee that we'll be able to accompany them as long or as far as we'd like. In our work, in our families, in the communities that we love, our roles change, the part we play changes. Our children no longer need us the way they once did, despite our love for them remaining unchanged; the work we once did is no longer physically possible, despite our desire to keep doing it; a job moves us away from a community where we have invested ourselves. Sometimes these moments are ones we choose—we retire, we move, we make a change. And sometimes things change before we are ready.

Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired, his vigor unabated.

From dust we were created and to dust we shall return. "A thousand years in God's sight are like yesterday when they are past," our psalm for this morning says. "God sweeps them away, they are like a dream." This is not a psalm that is trying to soften the brevity of human life—generations come and generations go. Grass flourishes in the morning and fades by evening. Even Moses, vigor unabated, reaches the boundary of the days he's been given. Instead, the psalmist asks God to "satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love so that we might rejoice and be glad in all our days," to make something of the time we've been given. A lifetime may be like a dream, but still, we must live in the days.

There are people in this congregation who have laid eyes or hands on almost every brick in our foundation. They know where the valves are to turn on the boiler, and that the really tall ladder you need to hang the Christmas wreath is stored along the secret staircase behind this wall. There are people in these pews who taught Sunday school to the parents of our current Sunday school children, who remember when the choir used to process in robes, and even when they used to come up that secret staircase. There are people who have been on our mission committee for decades, who remember trips to Appalachia and Africa. People who remember the smell of Hungarian sausage permeating the sanctuary, live animals in the Christmas pageant, two services on Sunday mornings.

And there are people who couldn't have found Welsh Hall a year ago. People who came because they wanted their kids to be in Sunday School or a friend invited them or they found the website, and now they serve on a committee, help run the pageant, attend Bible Study. Some of them even know where the really tall ladder is. There is a rich history sitting in these pews. And there is a rich future sitting in them as well.

This Stewardship season, we've been asking you to think about what you have to give and what you have to receive. This past Tuesday evening at our annual Deacon/Elder potluck, we asked our church leaders a slightly different question: with all the demands on your time, attention, and resources, why do you keep showing up here?

Their answers were similar to the ones you wrote on our paper chains: community, friendship, a sense of belonging. People talked about Covenant as a second family, a place where they could ask questions and be challenged in their faith. And then, someone who's been a member for over thirty years said, "because this isn't the same church that I joined."

"I stay because this isn't the same church that I joined."

All of us have inherited something from the people who came before us, whether we've been here for fifty years or fifty days. And all of us have something to offer that will shape what this community becomes. Sometimes that's a new idea or a willingness to take on something we've never done before. Sometimes it's years of experience or the wisdom to know when it's time to let someone else lead. And sometimes it's simply showing up, making room for another person to discover that they belong here too.

Moses does not enter the land, but Joshua does. Someone else opens Hannah's car door most mornings. Some people know every brick in Covenant, while others are just beginning to learn the building. And the Covenant we know today is not the Covenant that people joined thirty years ago, or even five years ago.

"Prosper for us the work of our hands." That's how Psalm 90 ends. The Hebrew used means "establish', or 'make firm'. And the psalmist says it twice: Prosper for us the work of our hands. Establish, make firm, the work of our hands.

We do not have to see the whole future for our lives and our gifts to matter. We are given these days, these people, this community, this work. We tend it while it is ours. We hand it on. And we ask God that the work of our hands might become part of something that continues beyond us.

Thanks be to God.