

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

October 25, 2020, The 21st Sunday of Pentecost / The 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Matthew 22:34-40

“...In All Generations...”

As I spent time with Psalm 90 this week, I was reminded of a story I told you 6 years ago, and want share part of it with you again. If you are reading along with the Bible readings on Sunday then you may have noticed that Psalm 90 has a title: “A prayer of Moses, the man of God.” This is the only psalm we have attributed to Moses.

As Moses names God as our dwelling place, or refuge, for all generations, we can imagine him on Mt. Nebo, the place where his life and ministry ended as he looked down at the Promised Land that he would never enter.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3 Season after Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, pl. 415*

When I was on the pastor’s trip to Jordan in 2005 part of our tour was going up on Mt. Nebo to stand where Moses stood, when he looked out over the Promised Land. For me it was one of the most surprising and the most moving parts of the trip. It was near the end of our tour and once more we piled out of the bus having heard the introduction to the site, some of its history in Christian times, and having read the story of Moses on Mt. Nebo that I just read.

Before entering the church that has been there in one form or another since the late 300’s we walked to the edge of the viewing platform on the top of Mt Nebo. And there it was before us, the same view that Moses saw at the end of his life.

The browns of the surrounding desert were broken by the deep blue of the Dead Sea to our left.

Then heading north along the line of the Jordan River, the green line of vegetation and farms split its way up through the brown desert on either side of the green, heading off to the horizon to our right.

In front of us on the western horizon, the line of the Mediterranean Sea.

I stood for a minute taking in the amazing vista in front of us and then much to my surprise I began to weep. I’ve heard the stories of Moses for as long as I can remember, from Bible Story Books and Sunday School when I was very young. I’d always felt sad for Moses standing above the Promised Land, unable to enter it, but I never felt connected to the story like I did that day. What I felt on Mt. Nebo back in 2005 was grief.

After all that Moses had lived through: a baby in a basket in the bullrushes, raised in Pharaoh’s palace in Egypt, realizing he was an Israelite and not an Egyptian, called by God at the burning bush to lead the Israelites out of Pharaoh’s enforced slavery, and 40 years of leading grumbling people toward freedom and the Promised Land.

Moses spoke for God to God’s chosen people over and over again, calling those people to be faithful to the God who loved them and guided them every step of the way. And then there he stood on Mt. Nebo, an old man, alone on the mountain, looking out at the beauty of the Promised Land that he would never see except from this great height.

I turned to look into the faces of the pastor’s around me and they were weeping too. None of us spoke about it until later that day; we just stood together weeping.

None of us was prepared for what it felt like to stand where Moses stood and look out at the beauty of that green, green land in the midst of the harsh desert.

The Jordan River valley was beautiful in the midst of the desert,
and Moses had worked so hard to get God's people safely there.

But he would never set foot in the Promised Land.

And yet, we have either Moses's words, or words in memory of Moses: "Oh Lord, you have been our dwelling place, our refuge, in all generations. The Psalm says that even though God's sense of time and ours are different, God is with us always. The psalm says a thousand years in human time are just like yesterday for God, or like a watch in the night, which would have been three hours long. Even though God is eternal, and our lives are short, God is with us. Even when all our plans have been changed.

On this Consecration Sunday when we, in each of our households, decide how we will support the life and ministry of First Presbyterian Church in 2021, I've been thinking about God's faithfulness to this congregation.

In this strange season of a world pandemic when nothing seems the same, and life feels unpredictable, and we have no idea how the next news cycle will change life again, we have the words of Psalm 90 reminding us of the longevity of God's faithfulness. God has been the refuge and dwelling place of this congregation for nearly 99 years as Presbyterians, and in total over 117 years.

In this season of Covid19, economic fears, a chaotic political landscape, and necessary calls for change in how we treat each other, God is our dwelling place.

God is our refuge, just as God has been our church's safe harbor for generations.

While we feel overwhelmed in the midst of this time in our history, Psalm 90 reminds us that God's faithfulness covers all the generations of First Presbyterian's life.

God has walked beside this congregation in World War I, the 1917 Influenza Epidemic, Women's Suffrage, the Great Depression, WWII, the Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Gulf Wars, September 11, 2001, the 2008 recession, and many other seasons of history that changed us. God has walked beside this congregation as its members stood at the gravesides of grandparents, parents and children.

In joys and in sorrows, in the familiar and in the midst of great changes in our world's and country's history, and our congregation's history, and our personal histories, God has walked beside us, and offered us a safe harbor. God has been our dwelling place in all generations.

While we may feel swallowed up by the living of these days here and now, Psalm 90 invites us to take the broader, longer view and see God's faithfulness across other times: of change, of fear, of anxiety and uncertainty, not only in our church's history, but since the history of Moses and back to the dawn of time.

In all generations, in our losses and our joys, God has been God. God has been our refuge and dwelling place in all generations!

What I also realized, as I read the story of Moses at Mt. Nebo is that 3400 years later,
we who follow Jesus Christ are the ones who now live in the promised land.

We who follow Jesus are the ones who have entered the "Promised Land" that is not a place, but the promised land of being in the very presence of God who is our refuge.

Our Israelite mothers and fathers of faith only knew God through what Moses told them,

and through the pillar of cloud that led them by day, the pillar of fire that led them at night, and the manna and quail that arrived morning and evening.

They knew God provided for their every need,
but God was distant to them,
someone who had to be interpreted and explained by Moses.

But we who believe in Jesus, and follow him, and gather Sunday by Sunday both in person, and now on YouTube, to be in his presence and worship him, know that there is nothing that separates us from the love of God.

We live in the promised land of the good news that God chose to come and live among us in Jesus.

We live in the promised land of being saved by grace by Jesus who died on the cross and rose to new life so that we would be named sons and daughters of God.

We live in the promised land of being adopted into God's family.

We are the ones who know that God's love is forever.

In the greatest joys in our lives, and in the valley of the shadow of death Jesus is with us and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We have seen the promised land in Jesus, and we live in that promised land day by day as we love him and follow him, even and especially in the midst of a world pandemic.

On Consecration Sunday, on this Stewardship Sunday, as we prepare to give our gifts to God for the coming year, we are saying that we want those who are with us now, and those who will come after us, to be able to come inside these walls, or open their computers or turn on their TV's and hear the stories of Jesus and his love for us.

On Consecration Sunday we are naming our commitment to others finding the joy of this promised land we know in Jesus.

We are not a church running a Consecration Sunday campaign, because we think we're a good business that should keep on running.

We hold an annual stewardship campaign because it gives us the opportunity to show our thanksgiving to God for all of God's love.

We give because we have been given to in great abundance.

We share because God has shared everything with us.

We share because the generations before us at First Presbyterian knew that people would come after them who would want to bring their friends and neighbors, and raise their children in a family of faith. The generations before us knew that in the midst of joy and sorrow and uncertainty, people would want:

to gather Sunday by Sunday to praise God in worship,
to ask for God's help and guidance through prayer together,
to provide a place where the stories of Jesus were told and learned through teaching and preaching and Bible Study and fellowship with other people of faith
and where people could reach out together to give to those in need.

And now we are the generation called to provide for the present, and prepare for the generations who will come after us. As has been true for all those who came before us, the future is uncertain, but God's faithfulness is sure.

As we fill out our pledge cards we are saying yes:
yes to being faithful followers of Jesus,

yes to the present ministries and missions of this congregation even when they look a bit different than they ever have before,
and yes to the future life of this church, whatever it will look like,
for the generations who will come after us,
who will one day be the stewards, the care givers
of this house of worship
and this community of faith.

So, let us pray together in the words of Psalm 90, "The prayer of Moses, the man of God:"

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.
May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands."

(Psalm 90: 1-2,16-17) New International Version)