



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: September 20, 2015

Title: "Getting the Results You Want"

Scripture: Psalm 90

Summary: Psalm 90, written by Moses when he failed to reach the Promised Land, offers insights about when we don't achieve our goals.

This is such a beautiful time of year. Last week contained the first hint of fall in the air. We enjoy the last of summer's vegetables while at the same time anticipate the trees transforming into an artist's canvas as their leaves burst into flame. Baseball heads towards the playoffs, even if the Braves do not. And that other game—what was that game?—oh yes, football. You UGA and Ga. Tech fans, enjoy your seasons, but be aware that my newly adopted team—the Kennesaw State Owls—is undefeated for the entire history of the school! (The Owls are playing their first football season ever and are riding a record-breaking two game winning streak!)

The downside to this time of year, however, arrives with an in our face attitude this Wednesday, September 23rd, at 4:22 am, Atlanta time: the autumnal equinox, when the sun crosses the equator to spend the season in the southern hemisphere. "The days grow short when you reach September..." (Sing it, Willie.)

"One hasn't got time for the waiting game." The days are still long, sort of; but time is short, for real. When was there ever plenty of time. "Summertime, and the living is easy..." Says who? Sixteen, eighteen hour days of work, errands, appointments, commuting or carpooling—we fall into bed exhausted after a long, long day, but another day without enough time to get everything done.

Or the days are long with nothing to do but watch the soaps, then watch the news, then the mindless sit-coms, scroll through Facebook, wait for the phone to ring, hoping something will happen—the days are endlessly long, but time is short. Because time is running out.

Sorry, I cannot give you more time. But I can give you Moses. Moses—the liberator, the leader, the shining example, the hope for all of us for whom time is short.

According to the scripture, Moses died at age 120, disappointed that his days were so short. He died before reaching the Promised Land. He went face-to-face with Pharaoh, led the people for forty years through the wilderness, delivered God's commandments to structure their lives, and finally approached the boundary of the Promised Land. He got so close he could see it, smell it. But he couldn't reach it.

Tradition has it that Moses had offended God somewhere back in the wilderness and this was Moses' punishment, this coming up short. Years earlier, when the people were dying of thirst, God told Moses to strike the rock once with his staff, and water came pouring out from the rock. But Moses struck the rock, not once but three times. Water still came pouring out, but so did God's anger. At the end of the journey, like an IRS auditor, God counted the rocks and the strikes and they didn't add up. Sorry, Moses, and you were so close.

Sound familiar? It is our fault, isn't it? It's always our fault. Somehow the responsibility and the guilt end up being ours. If we'd gotten up earlier, not played that game of Candy Crush, been better at delegating and assigning tasks—surely it's our fault that we come up short. And don't think for a minute that not having enough time will be a credible excuse!

We really don't have an excuse; but we have Moses, the model for all of us for whom time runs out before our hopes are realized. Even Moses didn't get it all done; neither shall we.

Deut 34:10 “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that Yahweh sent him to perform...” but he died before reaching the Promised Land, time ran out on him before he realized his hopes. If Moses didn't get it all done, what chance to ordinary folks like us have?

Psalm 90—Moses wrote that Psalm. And it reveals his pain.

v. 3 “You turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’” Ouch—for Moses, that “turn back” language sounds pretty personal.

v. 9 “For all our days pass away...our years come to an end like a sigh.” Ouch—for Moses leadership didn't end with a grand celebration and a ticker tape parade.

Standing on the top of a mountain, looking down at the people entering Israel, for Moses it ended with a sigh.

And God sounds so angry. Verse 7, “For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.” Except for the way the Psalm ends, and the nugget of solid gold that lies there in the middle. The Psalm ends with a hopeful prayer: “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper the work of our hands...” (v. 17) Moses said we are not saved by “the work of our hands,” but by the favor of the Lord our God. *God* will “prosper the work of our hands;” God will see to the results of our work.

We will not be saved—our lives will not become meaningful—as a result of what we manage to get done. Nor will we be condemned because we didn’t accomplish all the things on our lists. God will “prosper the work of our hands;” God will see to the results of our work. Moses ends with a powerful insight, one that will never be found in the books on management and success: we cannot generate results; God generates results.

Make you feel a little helpless? Look at that beautiful gem of wisdom in the middle of the Psalm, the line that expresses what we *can* do: “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” Our duty is to learn to tell time, to understand what time it is. The issue is not how well we *manage* time, but how well we *tell* time.

Moses, at age 120, with a life full of great accomplishments, prays, “So teach us to count our days, so that we may gain a wise heart.” (v. 12) Maybe he has become wise enough to realize that time is going to run out on him, that he is not going to realize his ultimate dream, that he will not finish the task assigned to him, but that this really does not matter. His life will not be measured by his getting the job done. “Teach us to count our days,” so that we may be free from the pressure of our days, free from the need to get it all done.

We are not saved by the work of our hands, by what we accomplish. Like Moses, we will never accomplish all that we desire—so we must live by hope. Like Moses, we may never know for certain—so we must live by faith. Our pure and honorable motives will never be seen by our enemies or by our friends as pure and honorable as they will by ourselves—so we must live by forgiveness. We will never accomplish *anything* without the contributions of others—so we must live by love. The

impact, outcome, and significance of everything we do is beyond our control—so we must live in the Lord our God.

V. 16 “Let *your* work be manifest to your servants...” Moses, his life drawing to a close, stands on the top of the mountain just short of the Promised Land that he will never reach. But he looks down into the valley of the River Jordan and sees his people crossing over, arriving home. He sees what God has accomplished. And his life does end with a sigh, not of despair, but of gratitude. “Thank you, Yahweh. It was a good ride.”

The ideas in this sermon, especially the closing paragraphs, came from a prayer meditation by Rev. Debbie Block, given at “The Church for Our Time” conference at Ghost Ranch in 2004.

