

**Sunday Sermon**  
**October 29, 2017**  
**“Supported by Our Traditions”**  
**Deuteronomy 34:1-8**  
**Hebrews 11:8-16**

Introduction:

Moses at the age of 120 years comes to the end of his life. And the account in Deuteronomy says he climbs from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo and up to a summit of Mount Pisgah to die.

But before he dies, he looks across the river, and he sees the Promised Land. So I figure if Moses was in Nebo on a summit of Pisgah, looking across a river at the Promised Land, that was the Catawba, and he was looking at Morganton, right?

Moses looks at the land, and God says, “This is the land I promised to your forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I promised it to your people in the wilderness.”

But then God says, “I have let you see the Promised Land, but you will not cross over into it.” And the story says Moses, the servant of the Lord, dies there on the mountain.

I.

Somehow that does not seem fair, does it? Moses, who lift the comfort and security of tending sheep to challenge mighty Pharaoh, who climbed thundering and smoking Mount Sinai to speak with God face-to-face, whose obedience to God gained him the reputation, “no prophet in Israel was ever like him,” this Moses does not get to enter the Promised Land? That does not seem fair.

And yet, there is un-fulfillment, unfinished business in this life, life spent on the verge, at the door but not over the threshold, seeing from a distance but not getting there.

In his last sermon, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a great reformer bearing the name of a great reformer, preached from this passage in Deuteronomy: “I’ve been to the mountain,” he said. “I’ve seen the Promised Land. Even if I don’t get there with you. I’ve been to the mountaintop.”

Hours later, that reformer for civil rights was felled by a sniper’s bullet. He died outside the Promised Land of racial equality and justice. He never got there, but he saw it from a distance.

II.

Today we celebrate two anniversaries of people who saw promises from a distance. The 220th Anniversary of when a group of committed, faithful individuals

gathered to form this congregation. And the 500th Anniversary of when a young monk named Martin Luther wrote out a list of 95 things about the church in his day that needed to be changed, reformed. Tradition says Luther took that list and nailed it to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. And those hammer blows began the Protestant Reformation.

Here our forerunners were organizing to grow a church. In Luther's day, the church had grown to corruption. And to support the hierarchy of the church, the papal wars and the building of cathedrals like St. Peter's, the church sold indulgences, pardons purchased to cancel out your sins. If you paid enough, you could get forgiveness for yourself and your loved ones and be saved from purgatory.

But Luther said no, true forgiveness comes not through anything you do or any feigned or purchased righteousness. It is through God's grace, God's grace alone, that we receive forgiveness.

Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers as the television world knew him, was a Presbyterian minister. At Pittsburgh Seminary, Rogers studied theology, Greek, and Hebrew with a man named Dr. William Orr.

After Dr. Orr retired and moved to a nursing home, Mr. Rogers and his wife would visit Orr on Sunday afternoons. One Sunday, Rogers said they had just sung in worship "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," one of Luther's best known hymns.

Rogers said, "I was full of this one verse." So I said, "Dr. Orr, we just sang this hymn, and I've got to ask you about part of it. You know part where it says: The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. For, lo, his doom is sure .... one little word will fell him. Dr. Orr, what is that one thing that would wipe out evil?"

"Forgiveness," the old scholar said, "Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of forgiveness. So when you look on your neighbor, don't look with the eyes of the accuser—which is what the word Satan means in Hebrew. Instead, look with the eyes of the Advocate, those are the eyes of Jesus." "I've never forgotten that," Rogers said.

Think about it: If there had been no Reformation and the church still sold indulgences for forgiveness, we would have no need for stewardship campaigns and stewardship sermons. But then giving would be out of fear and guilt. And true stewardship comes not out of fear or guilt but out of hearts of gratitude for what God has done for us.

### III.

Why was Moses denied entrance into the Promised Land? The writer in Deuteronomy suggests that he violated God's law, but it is really not explained there. Maybe that writer could not explain it.

But over in the epistle of Hebrews that writer does explain. Moses does not receive what has been promised, Hebrews says, because God has reserved it for a

fulfillment that can only come through Christ Jesus. It is in Christ that promises are ultimately fulfilled.

One of our Presbyterian reformation ancestors was John Calvin. The foundation of Calvin's theology was spiritual union with Christ. And in that union, we are justified before God and we are regenerated to new life. The fulfillment comes in Christ.

Sometimes these days, it is difficult for us to envision fulfillment of God's promises. We squint to see from a distance. But in Christ, God takes the incompleteness, the unfinished, the unfulfilled and replaces them with hope, purpose, promise.

Conclusion:

On the evening of February 18, 1546, Martin Luther, at the age of 63, was in Eisleben, the city of his birth. He began to experience a rapid heartbeat. He was given some medication, his heart quieted down, and he went to bed and slept.

But then around 1:00 AM, Luther awoke, calling out in pain. Those in the house rushed to his room. Luther began repeating over and over: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

Luther's friend, Dr. Jonas, was with him, knew what was happening and asked Luther, "Do you want to die standing firm on Christ and the doctrine you have taught?" Luther answered, "Yes."

At about 3:00 AM, Luther died of a heart attack, 28 ½ years after he had shared his list for reform. In his pocket was found a piece of paper with another list he had written, a list of sentences. The last sentence on the paper was simply, "This is true. We are all beggars."

500 years after the beginning of the Reformation, 220 years after the founding of this congregation, it is still true. We all still stand before God as beggars. And forgiveness still comes through God's grace and grace alone, and promises are still fulfilled through Christ and Christ alone.

May we follow the footsteps of those who saw from a distance and step forth committing to this church's future. Amen.