



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
February 23, 2020 Sermon

At Heaven's Door: The Tears of Old Men

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 34:1-8, Luke 2:25-32

Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself. . . .

Both good and evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective: the good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrow take on the quality of heaven: The bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. - C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Church Music

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: Now I in you without a body move,
Rising and falling with your wings: We both together sweetly live and love,
If I travel in your company, You know the way to heaven's door.

—George Herbert

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

There's something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men.

The old man in this instance is Moses; he's 120 years old. And God has told him that it's time for him to die. The Bible puts it this way: On that very day the Lord addressed Moses as follows: "Ascend this mountain, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and you shall be gathered to your people."

And Moses *does* die there on Mount Nebo, and he *is* gathered to his people. But not before he sees the promised land. The promised land—he sees the promised land. After all those years. . . . After all those years as a fugitive from Egypt, keeping his father-in-law's, Jethro's, flocks. After all the back and forth with God at the burning bush, all the back and forth with Pharaoh and his magicians in Egypt, and those plagues and the Passover, and all the planning and the packing, and all the panicking and the running and the parting of the Red Sea, and then—the great song of triumph—

And then—all those years on the road: in the wilderness, wandering, wandering. All those all the ups and downs, including going up the mountain to meet one true, living God to receive the Ten Commandments, only to come back down to find the Israelites dancing around a golden calf of their hands' own making—as if the one true living God who had called them—who saved them, who made them into a people, God's people—was never made known to them. After all the joy, all the heartbreak, and all the life. After all those years.

He's at heaven's door, Moses, on Mount Nebo. And he sees it all. He looks back and he sees his whole life and the whole life of his people, and he knows that God has been with him, with them, through it all. But he also looks forward, looks forward to the fulfillment of God's promise: he can see the promised land. Moses is at heaven's door

His eyes fill with tears. There's something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men. Listen now for God's Word, Deuteronomy Chapter 34 verses 1-8 . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

There's something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men. The old man in this instance is Simeon; it's not clear exactly how old he is (the Bible doesn't say) but it's clear that he's old. And God, through the Holy Spirit, has told him that it's time for him to die. But not before he sees the promised child, the Lord's Messiah. And as he takes the child from his parents, Mary and Joseph, as he lifts him up in his arms to look at him, he begins to pray, to sing actually, to sing a prayer: it's called the Song of Simeon, in Latin the "Nunc Dimmitis," which means: "Now you dismiss," which are the first words of the prayer in Latin.

The promised child. Just as Moses sees the promised land, Simeon sees the promised child. After all those years. All those years of waiting and hoping. After all the joy, all the heartbreak, and all the life. After all those years. He's at heaven's door, Simeon, in the temple. And he sees it all. He looks back on the course of his whole life and the life of his people, and he realizes that God has been with him, with them, through it all. But he also looks forward, looks forward to the fulfillment of God's promise in this child. His eyes fill with tears. There's something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men. Listen now for God's Word. The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 25-32 . . .

Sermon:

Old men cry easily, much more easily, than they did when they were young. I saw this in my father as he grew older: he couldn't get through the Thanksgiving prayer without choking up. I've seen it in other old men. I feel it in myself—I had a birthday last week: I'm not old yet, but I'm getting there.

I offer no explanation, physiological, sociological, or otherwise, other than to say that, with age sometimes comes wisdom, perhaps wisdom enough to know that what we were taught as boys—that tears are weakness—is a lie. As I said, there is something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men. And in saying that, I don't mean to disparage the tears of women or of those who are younger. It's just that, last week, I called Jack Longstreth.

I know that many of you remember Jack. Jack will turn 93 this year. He and his wife Dede have been married for going on 68 years now. Almost a year ago, they moved to a retirement community in Virginia to be closer to their daughter. He sent a nice card [hold up]—you can see he still uses our Te Deum window stationary—so I wanted to give him a call.

"We haven't really found a church here yet, Richard," Jack said; "gone to a few, even went to an Episcopal church; heard some good preaching, some good music, but nothing like Westminster."

"50 years—we were members at Westminster, 50 years, Richard. Every Sunday, I would always say to Charlie Hardwick whenever he was ushering, 'Charlie, row #21, left hand side center aisle.' And he would always say, 'I know, Jack, I know.'"

"You know, Richard, I sang in choirs since I was eleven years old. Sang in the Purdue Glee Club; and right after college, I sang at the church in Wabash under Bob Stofer."

And then Jack told me how he and Dede met and got married in Columbus, and how they decided to move to Dayton. "But you know, Richard," Jack continued, "we didn't start out at Westminster, no, we started out at — and here Jack named another Presbyterian church in town that I won't name.

"And I was singing in their choir," Jack continued, ". . . and it was . . . OK. But then somebody told me that if you want to hear a really good choir, you had to go to Westminster. And so I did, and there was Bob Stofer. So I joined the choir, and we joined Westminster.

I knew it was coming. As Jack and I continued to talk, I knew it was coming: the one thing that he believed to be his single greatest contribution to this church, the one thing he was the most proud of, and the one thing he would tell anyone and everyone, whenever the subject of Westminster came up, and even when it didn't.

"You know, Richard, I was on the search committee that brought John Neely." In fact, I did know that. I knew that because Jack had told me that before; the most recent time being in the note he sent: [pick up to read] "John is the best thing [best is underlined] that ever happened to WPC!! [two exclamation points]. And being on his search committee was the best thing we ever did for dear old Westminster. Say a "Hey!!" to all my friends and blessings to all, Jack and Dede."

It was then as we were talking, as Jack was remembering everyone who was on that committee, and remembering all his friends here (many of whom have gone to glory), and remembering all the joy and all the heartbreak and all the life through all the years that he and Dede had together here in Dayton, it was then that I could hear the tears rising in his voice.

There was a long pause. "Oh, Richard, I'm going to cry."

"That's OK, Jack, that's OK. Me too."

There is something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men.

Maybe it's only when we've grown old, when we're at heaven's door, looking back, retrospectively, that we can see the true character, the true significance, the ultimate meaning of it all, all the ups and downs, everything that happens to us—all the joy, all the heartbreak, all the life—in our lives—maybe it's only then that we can see that God has been with us always, through it all.

Maybe. But maybe that process can also happen even before that, even before we're at heaven's door. In fact, it does happen whenever families and friends get together, whenever we reminisce.

We all do it: tell stories recounting difficult, even painful, experiences and times in our lives, that is. They really were hard experiences and times, yet in telling and hearing the stories, we enjoy it, we even laugh about it! "I'd never ever ever want to go through all that—any of that—again!" you say with a shudder, "but still (you say with a laugh), we made it: God must have been with us, the right people were there at the right time, even though I sure didn't think so at the time."

It's the way most of us remember middle school. And it's the way John Neely remembers his interview with Jack's search committee. "Oh, let me tell you! That was the most difficult interview I ever had in my life. They put me through the wringer. They only thing they *didn't* ask me to do was give blood." It was the day after I had talked to Jack, at our staff lunch, and I had asked John about the interview.

"I had to conduct a choir rehearsal, play a recital for BOTH the choir and the committee, accompany a soloist, accompany the choir during rehearsal, and then had to go up to the choir loft to accompany and direct the choir singing excerpts from *Messiah*. All in one night. And the organ was not in good shape—it had a cough!" Sometimes, even when we're not at heaven's door, we can look back and see that, through it all, through all the ups and downs, as difficult and as painful as it all was for us at the time, God has always been with us.

Bruce Springsteen turned 70 last year. For the better part of my life, I would have said that makes him an old man. Now . . . I'm not so sure. I understand that not everyone loves Bruce Springsteen the way I do. No, that's not true: I don't understand it; I acknowledge it—the way you do when God says in Isaiah, "For my ways are not your ways," or when Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold," I acknowledge it, but I don't understand it. See, you have to understand: when I was growing up in New Jersey . . . well, Bruce Springsteen who's about a decade older than I am—Bruce Springsteen was the man. He was the epitome of youthful, swaggering, sauntering rock-and-roll masculinity. We all wanted to be like **The Boss**.

But you also have to understand is that Springsteen did not hit the big time right away; it took ten years. Oh, Springsteen was a local, even a regional legend before that—as kids growing up in New Jersey, we knew about him, listened to his first couple of albums, played them at our parties; loved him. The cool kids even went down the shore to see him and his band play. (My parents wouldn't let me.) But back then, there were lots of bands playing in those cheap little seaside bars, bands who had even cut a record or two, but who never ever made it big. It was only with his third album, *Born to Run*, and with the hit song of that same name, that Bruce really hit the big time.

When Springsteen published his autobiography in 2016, it was called, of course, *Born to Run*. And when he was did his one-man show, *Springsteen on Broadway*, in 2017 and 18, the last number of the show was—you guessed it—*Born to Run*.

And yes I know, I'm from New Jersey, I've heard it many, many times: *Born to Run* is a song about the desperate desire to get out of, to *leave*, New Jersey. But that's not the deepest desire expressed in the song. The deepest desire is . . . Well, it's in the last couple lines:
*someday, girl, I don't know when
We're gonna get to that place
Where we really wanna go and we'll walk in the sun*

There's another one of Springsteen's great songs, called *The Promised Land*: "Mister I ain't no boy no I'm a man and I believe in the promised land." That's the deepest desire *Born to Run* expresses—for the promised land.

In the album from the Broadway show, Springsteen introduces *Born to Run* with a beautiful reminiscence. (I went online to find the words, and up popped an ad for a nearby retirement community . . . I'm not old yet, but I'm getting there.) Anyway, here's part of what he said: *It was a beautiful fall November evening, and I was working on my book and I drove back to my neighborhood where I grew up, looking for uh—I still don't have a clue what I was looking for.*

The streets were dead empty and the whole place looked like it'd been locked down since 1955. My corner church was silent and unchanged. I rolled slowly another 50 yards up my block to visit my great tree and it was gone. It'd been cut to the street since the last time that I had drove through.

So I got out of the car and I looked down, and there was a square of musty earth that held the remaining snakes of its roots on the edge of the parking lot. So I reached down, I picked up a handful of dirt and I just kinda ran it through my hands, and my heart sank like, like a kid who suffered from irretrievable loss, like some, some piece of me was gone.

It was just it had been there long before I was, I assumed it would be there long after I was gone, and I liked that. It felt eternal. It was at center of our street and it had rooted our neighborhood for so long.

[But] I looked again and then I realized it was gone but some, some essential piece of it was still there, the air and the space above its roots. I could still feel the life, and soul, and the light, of my childhood friend there.

It's just that its leaves, its branches, and its massive trunk were now outlined, shot through by evening stars and sky. But my great tree's life couldn't be ended or erased so easily—it had stood witness to everything that had happened on these small streets beneath its arms. All the joy, and all the heartbreak, and all the life.

Like Moses, he's at heaven's door—Springsteen—sitting there, where the tree once stood, looking back over the course of his whole life. And, like Moses, he's looking into the promised land. He says: *And when we live amongst ghosts, always trying to reach us, from that shadow world, and they're with us every step of the way. My dead father's still with me every day and I miss him.*

And as he's saying this, you can hear the tears rising in his voice; and then there's this long pause. . . . See that's the thing: tears for the beauty and goodness, the love and the life of this world, and their felt loss—those tears are not weakness, they're strength: they're what make us human. Because Springsteen's voice comes back stronger as he says: *But I visit with my Dad every night, a little bit, and that's a grace-filled thing.*

Another long pause. There's something beautiful, something sacred, in the tears of old men.

And then he talks about seeing his father talking to Clarence Clemmons, the long-time saxophonist in his band who died in 2011. And about seeing his other band members, friends, family members who have passed on. All of them—there, with him, and with one another. He says: *Souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, in dusty roots, in sidewalks that I knew every single inch of like I knew my own body, as a child, and in the songs that we sing, **That is why we sing** . . . maybe that's what I'm lookin' for when I go down there to the old neighborhood, I just wanna commune with the old spirits, stand in their presence, feel their hands on me. One more time.*

And as I'm listening to this, I'm thinking, "OK this is it, now, **now** at last, he's going to break into *Born to Run*."

Only he doesn't. Instead, he talks about looking up at his old church. Like Simeon he has a prayer to sing:

Once again I stood in the shadow of my old church ya know, the words of a very strange but all too familiar prayer came back to me that evening, words that as a kid, I mumbled, I sing-songed them, I chanted them, I was one of Saint Rose's unwilling disciples, ya know.

But for some reason, as I sat there on my street that night, mourning my old tree, and once again surrounded by God, those were the words that came back to me and they flowed differently: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, just give us this day and forgive us our sins, our trespasses, as we may forgive those who trespass against us, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, all of us, forever and ever, Amen".

And then—only then does he hit the opening chords of *Born to Run*: "And we'll walk in the sun"—the promised land.

And that's why I'm asking you to give to the Westminster Music Fund in Honor of John W. Neely.

Not because (as the brochure says) "Westminster, remaining true to its heritage as both a 'teaching church' and a 'music church,' and because of the blessing of John Neely, is in a unique position to serve the larger church by training music residents to serve throughout their lives." That's true, but that's not why I'm asking you to give.

And it's not because (as the brochure says) "John has always been a pre-eminent musician and conductor, a marvelous teacher, a caring pastor, and a good friend. The Westminster Music Fund seeks to honor that."

That's profoundly true, and I feel it deeply. But that's not why I'm asking.

No, the reason I'm asking you to give is that, right now, there's a child in our Calvin choir, a boy or a girl it doesn't matter, who some 70 or 80 years from now, on a beautiful fall November evening, as an old person, will drive here to stand in the shadow of this old church—or maybe just to see its outline shot through by evening stars and sky (time and chance happeneth to all things)—no matter, whatever the case, there will be a prayer, a song, in that child's heart, a prayer, a song, that that child learned here. And we will be there, too, all of us, at heaven's door with our hands on that now-old child. One more time.

That is why we sing. Forever and ever. Amen.