October 25, 2026

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 "Wait, What?"

Last week at our men's retreat, we played an old camp game called "two truths and a lie." You divide into small groups and share three things about yourself, but one of them is a lie. The group, then, must determine which one is the lie. Most of the guys used the standard strategy and told three things that all seemed like tall tales and let the group debate about which one was the lie. When it was my turn I did something different. Isaid, "I'm married to a hospice chaplain. I took a preaching class in seminary. And I was in a wedding with Evel Knievel." The guys rolled their eyes and said, "Well of course the Evel Knievel thing is a lie." And I said, "No, that's true. My youth pastor married into the Knievel family and I was a groomsman." And that threw them off. They said, "But we know your wife is a hospice chaplain!" Yup. Finally one of the guys said, "Wait a minute, you didn't take a preaching class in seminary?" I did not. "But you're a preacher!" Indeed I am. But I wasn't on the pastor track in seminary. I was on the teacher/scholar track. I had no intention or desire to be a preacher. Sure, I pastored a church for six years in Virginia, but my seminary required you to have supervised ministry experience even if you weren't on the preaching track. So I served First Chrisian Church in Pearisburg for the four years I was in seminary, and then two more years out of gratitude for their support during that time. I may have even stayed there longer, but the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Virginia wanted to know if I'd be interested in being an associate regional minister for camps, youth ministry, and men's ministry – you know, teaching/education kinds of things. I said "yes" and got the job.

Granted, I did a little preaching when I worked for the region. That was a necessary part of the job. You had to visit churches and wave the regional banner. That's how you stayed connected. But my main job was to oversee the region's outdoor ministry program and manage their camp. Now to be honest, at that time in my life, I was *way* more

qualified to be a preacher than a camp manager, but you learn to swim very quickly when you're thrown into the deep end of the pool.

For my first three years on regional staff, I was tasked with boosting attendance at our church camps, attracting more outside groups to rent the facilities, and turning the camp's annual operating deficit into a surplus. It was a bumpy road and a lot of work, but I finally achieved all three goals. You know who wasn't happy about this? The previous manager. He said, "I don't understand. For a decade I worked so hard to make these things happen, and you come along and do it in three years." I said, "Yeah, but I wouldn't have been able to do it if you hadn't paved the way." And it's true! When I took the job, most of the foundational work had already been done. I just needed to tweak some things and eliminate a few roadblocks, and we were up and running.

I could understand the previous manager's frustration. There have been plenty of times in my life when it seemed like I did all the hard work, only to have someone else come along, make a few changes, and get all the credit and applause. And in a way, that's what happens in our scripture from Deuteronomy this morning.

Think about Moses. God calls him to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Then Moses spends the next forty years leading them through the wilderness, listening to them complain about everything from the food to the accommodations. There were even times when they said they wanted to go back to Egypt! But Moses kept going. He led them through the wilderness, helped them understand what it meant to be God's covenant people, and prepared them for life in the Promised Land. And then, after forty years of all that work, God takes Moses up on a mountain, shows him the Promised Land, and tells him he can't enter. Wait, what?

This is the same God who called Moses to face the mighty Pharaoh. The same God who gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The same God Moses had served through forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

And now Moses doesn't get to finish the journey? Why not?! Well, elsewhere in Deuteronomy and in the book of Numbers, we're given explanations for why Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land. And frankly, we could spend the rest of our time debating about whether the punishment fits the offense. But that's not where I want to go this morning. Because there's another question that interests me even more. Does the fact that Moses never reached the Promised Land mean that his mission was a failure? Or, to put it another way, was Moses' *life* a failure?

Well, of course not! Was Moses perfect? Hardly! Did he get angry with the Israelites? You bet he did! Did he occasionally have a few words with God about the whole arrangement? Yeah, he did. But look at all these things he accomplished! He prepared God's people for a future they could scarcely imagine. And here's the thing: It was a future he would never personally experience.

Think about this for a moment - we spend so much of our lives working toward things we may never see completed. Parents raise children without knowing what kind of adults they'll become. Teachers invest in students whose accomplishments they may never witness. People work for justice knowing the struggle may continue long after they're gone. And churches invest in ministries and communities whose futures are impossible to predict. Maybe faithfulness isn't measured by whether we reach the destination, but by whether we've helped others continue the journey.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians earlier, Paul explicitly acknowledges that some people get to enjoy the results of work done by others. Jesus does the same in John 4:37 when he says, "One sows and another reaps." Next Sunday is All Saints Day which is a time where we remember the people who established the church, constructed the building, taught Sunday school, supported youth ministries, and made decisions years ago that continue to benefit people today. Many of those people are no longer here to see the results. I'm sure that there will be ministries that

emerge out of the things that we're laying the foundations for today that will be growing and thriving in future generations.

So let's talk about what our responsibility is in order for this to happen. And you might say, "Yeah, pastor, that's pretty simple: *Keep the doors of the church open*!" I'd like to push back on that thinking. When we think in terms of "keeping the church doors open," we start focusing on institutional preservation. That is *not* our goal. If the doors of our church stay open for the next thirty years, that's just a *byproduct* of what we do here and now. It's *not* the goal. *Our* responsibility is to make it possible for future generations to engage in ministries that we can't even imagine yet.

Those of us sitting in this room today are beneficiaries of others' faithfulness. That's why we recognize the folks who have gone on before us. It's an expression of thanksgiving for all the hard work they put in so we can do what we're doing right here right now. We've made some outstanding investment decisions in the past, and the fruit of those decisions have enabled us to do exciting new things in ministry.

But here's something I want you to think about. When we talk about the future of the church, *whose future are we talking about*? Because chances are, some of the people who will benefit most from the decisions we make today aren't even here yet. Some haven't been born. Others may never set foot inside this building. Whoa, wait, are you suggesting this building might not even be here? Who knows? And some may find their way to God through ministries that don't even exist yet. We don't know what the church will look like thirty or forty years from now. And frankly, if we think we do, we're probably kidding ourselves! But that doesn't mean we stop investing in its future. It means we trust that God is still at work, even when we can't see where that work is leading.

Moses never entered the Promised Land. But his young partner in ministry Joshua did. And so did the people Moses had spent forty years

preparing for that moment. Moses didn't get to see how the story turned out. But he helped make the next chapter possible. And maybe that's what God is asking of us. Not to guarantee the future. Not to preserve everything exactly as it is today or worse, trying to go back in time and re-creating what we *think* were the "golden years" of our church. We are called to be faithful with the opportunities we've been given now, so that others can carry the work *forward*. So here's my challenge for you this week. Think about something you're doing right now—not necessarily in the church, but anywhere in your life—that might make a difference for someone long after you're gone. Maybe it's a ministry you support, a young person you encourage, a kindness you extend, or a stand you take for something you believe is right. You may never know what comes of it. You may never see the results. Someone else may even get the credit! But that doesn't mean it wasn't worth doing. Because sometimes the most important thing we can accomplish in life isn't reaching the Promised Land ourselves. It's helping someone else get there.