

October 26, 2014

TEXT: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

TITLE: Looking Toward the Horizon

I'm going to play the first 20 measures of Franz Schubert's piano sonata in B-flat major. Listen for something unusual that Schubert includes in this music. (Play excerpt.) This piece opens with a simple melody based on just three chords – B-flat, E-flat, and F major. But in the eighth measure, there's this odd, whole-note trill low in the bass – ominous sounding, like thunder rumbling in the distance. And it appears throughout this movement; so the question is, why this juxtaposition of lovely major chords in the right hand and this uncomfortable low trill in the left hand? Let me share a few more details about this piece. This is the last piano sonata Schubert wrote. It is part of a group of three sonatas he finished in September 1838, when he was dying and only had two more months to live. He was 31 years old – an unrecognized genius during his lifetime who composed over 600 songs, 15 piano sonatas, a dozen string quartets, seven complete and many other unfinished symphonies, operas, masses, piano trios and much more. For Schubert in 1838, no matter how beautiful the melody was he heard in his head, the low rumbling presence of death was always close at hand.

We are mortal creatures. We don't like to dwell on that fact, but it is true nonetheless. Schubert's last months were shaped by the fact of his impending death. It had to affect what he wrote. We are no different from Schubert in that respect. Our lives will inevitably draw to a close and when we remember that fact, we think differently and perhaps even act differently. Now, it is also true that we exert a lot of energy trying to deny the reality of death. We buy anti-aging creams; we start exercise routines and diets and increase the frequency of our doctor's visits to keep death at bay. We are even hesitant to talk about it, as if just speaking the words will prompt the Grim Reaper to appear on our doorstep.

We are not meant to be comfortable with death. And being a Christian doesn't change that fact. Some overly-enthusiastic people of faith argue that because we believe in Jesus Christ and trust Him as Lord and Savior we shouldn't fear death. We are not to "rage against the dying of the light" but to walk gladly toward Christ's heavenly kingdom. But I think that's a misrepresentation of what's in scripture. Remember Christ himself struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying, "Abba, Father, take this cup away from me." Christians, like all people, are uncomfortable about death and struggle with thinking about the end of their own life. But Christians also know that death is not ultimately powerful or ultimately victorious. Which is why, despite death's persistent, low rumbling presence throughout our earthly lives, we still can compose beautiful melodies and live out our days in hope.

The last days of Moses' life are described in the final chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. God led Moses to the top of Mt. Nebo – a low mountain about 40 miles east of Jerusalem on the far side of the Jordan River. After years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites were about to cross into the Promised Land, but this was a journey Moses would not make with them. The bible describes Moses as 120 years old, strong of sight and full of vigor; yet after God shared a vision of the promised kingdom, Moses would die and be buried on Mt. Nebo.

Moses standing there, looking toward the horizon at the end of his life, reminds me of the well-known funeral prayer that says, *“Support us, O Lord, as the shadows lengthen and evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done.”* It also calls to mind the funeral hymn: *“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide! When other helpers fall and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me.”* Neither Moses nor any of us is given a script about how to live our final days. However Moses, like every one of us, longs to fill our lives with meaning up to our last days and to glance toward that distant horizon with confidence and hope.

I read an essay about a family who received the news one day that their daughter's piano teacher – a woman named Peg – was dying of cancer. She had been hospitalized and eventually came home with hospice care. However, with proper pain management, Peg surprisingly could keep teaching a while longer. She gave weekly lessons for another month and enjoyed two final concerts played for her by former students. More importantly, she could do what she loved a bit longer. She had time to give each student a personal gift and share how special they were to her.¹

So the first point to remember is that when life draws to an end, the language of the medical world can drown out the language of faith. Gravely ill people suddenly have to deal with treatment plans, intensive care units, and IV drug regimens, when what they want at the end of their life is to stand on that mountaintop between life and death and have an opportunity to pass on a few words of wisdom and tell those around them how special they truly are. We need to better educate the medical community and protect the right of conscious, intentional goodbyes at the close of life as part of a faith-based understanding of the transition from life and death.

But that is only part of our obligation. When Deuteronomy 34 describes the end of Moses' life, it notes that Joshua was his successor; and after mourning Moses for 30 days, the Israelites followed Joshua and finally crossed into the Promised Land. It feels a bit like the scene from the old Disney movie, “The Lion King,” in which Mufasa, the father lion, holds up his newborn son, Simba, from the mountaintop while all of nature sings about “The Circle of Life.” Yet life does not move in circles. We are not simply cars moving around an oval track over and over again with newer cars replacing the old ones that wear out.

The second point to remember is this: Life moves in cycles, not circles. There are cycles of birth and death, of old people looking toward the horizon at the end of life and young leaders stepping forward to continue their work. But even though life has a cyclical quality, cycles do not inevitably advance unless we are intentional about moving things forward. Cycles can be either progressive or destructive. Progress toward a better horizon can be impeded. Fifty years ago, when the dust from the horrors of World War II and Hiroshima settled a bit, people came to realize that it was deeply wrong and fundamentally evil to actively engage in nuclear war. So a commitment to stopping nuclear war was added to the responsibilities handed from one generation to the next – a work that sadly remains unfinished. And now, in addition to concerns about nuclear weapons and military warfare are more recent ethical worries about how it is deeply wrong, if not evil, to destroy our environment and to create a legacy of suffering for our children and grandchildren.² Our faith calls us to work for a better world shaped by God’s values and Christ’s redemptive love. Only then can the cycle of life move toward a horizon of peace culminating in God’s kingdom.

We all stand on Mt. Nebo and look toward a horizon that includes the reality of life’s end. Standing there for some is an exercise in despair – a minor key moment raging against the coming of the night. But the resources of our Christian faith and the confidence that we are upheld by a loving, providential God, means that we can compose our songs of life without fearing death’s power – and that we are to live out all our days with intentionality and strong conviction. We live knowing our responsibility for moving the cycle of life in an aspirational, upward direction. We live remembering the One who is beside us and whose work continues after us as we strive toward a future Promised Land.

One last story: E.B. White, the beloved author of “Charlotte’s Web,” wrote about watching his wife Katharine plant bulbs in her garden in the last autumn of her life. He said, “There [she] was...this small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed [flower] chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.”³

What a great phrase: “plotting the resurrection!” We look to the horizon from our Mt. Nebos knowing that the undeniable presence of death does not have the final word, that it does not sound the final chord in the melody of life. Its low rumble can be unsettling. But in Christ we have been taught to sing a different song. Our God points us to a far horizon and promises to accompany us on the journey from here to there. That good news gives us strength for today and hope for tomorrow, as we “plot the resurrection,” planting seeds for future gardens, and working intentionally so that the cycle of life moves ever upward. For this and so much more, thanks be to God!

¹ Atul Gawande, “The Best Possible Day,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2014.

² Robert Jay Lifton, “The Climate Swerve,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2014.

³ Glen Wiberg, *Christian Ministry*, Sept/Oct 1998, p. 29.