How to Celebrate a 120-Year Legacy

Hespeler, October 25, 2026 © Scott McAndless – St. Andrew's Hespeler Heritage Sunday
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

We gather today to celebrate the legacy of St. Andrew's Hespeler Presbyterian Church, one of our two founding congregations. St. Andrew's Hespeler was founded in 1855 and moved into this building in 1920. And the question is: how do you celebrate the legacy of something that has been around for 171 years and in this place for 116 years?

Character of Moses

The editor of the Book of Deuteronomy had to deal with the same question. At the end of the book, the main character of four of the first five books of the Bible finally dies. And Moses has an incredible legacy to celebrate – a 120-year legacy, close to the same amount of time that St Andrew's Hespeler has been around.

He set his people free. He then stood up to the mightiest empire that had ever existed, defeating their superior army. He also gave his people a kind of constitution, a code of laws, that they could live by and led them through forty of the most difficult years of wandering you could imagine.

Who Wrote the Story of his Death?

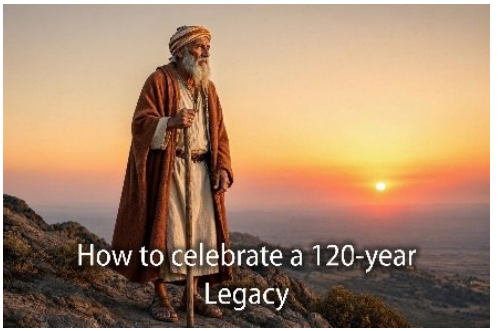
According to tradition, the first five books of the Bible were all written by Moses. Now, modern scholars disagree with that and have demonstrated that these books were written by several authors and then edited together. But let's just go with the tradition for a moment and imagine that Moses did write it all.

But even if that were true, readers very early on realized that there was no way that Moses could have written this final chapter of Deuteronomy. How can anyone write an account of their own death? So, somebody else took on the task of summing up 120 years of life and accomplishment in one chapter.

Summing up his Legacy

And how would you do that? Wouldn't you do it something like this:

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD told him to look backwards at everything he had accomplished. God showed him the corpse of the Egyptian he had slain and buried in the sand. God showed him all the plagues that rolled over the land of Egypt, bringing death and destruction. After that came a wonderful panoramic view of the battle of the Red Sea, with the water standing up straight and the chariot wheels stuck in the mud.



And then there was another battle; Moses wasn't quite sure if he even remembered who they were fighting that time. But Moses was up on a hill overlooking the battlefield, holding his staff up in the air. When he held the staff up high, the Israelites won, but when he grew weary and let the staff fall, they started to lose.

Forty Years of Wandering

This was followed by an extended montage of the forty years travelling in the wilderness. There were arguments and people complaining. He saw the manna falling on the ground and quail flying over the camp in droves. And then Moses watched as his younger self stepped forward, staff in hand, and struck the rock bringing forth great streams of water.

But everything paled in comparison to the reprise of what happened on Mount Sinai, where Moses stood serene on the peak while the people did their best to break every commandment they could on the plains below

And as Moses stood there on the top of Mount Nebo, he gazed over everything that he had done. And Moses said, “I am weary, Lord.” And Moses died there on top of Mount Nebo. And the people came and buried him and created a great mausoleum that they could visit regularly to remember and honour everything Moses had accomplished.

Honouring Our Past

That is how we would do it. When we want to honour a legacy in the church, we put up plaques and tell stories about the way things used to be. In fact, we do even more. We idolize and idealize the way things were.

Even more importantly, we make the past the model for the future of the church. If there was some program that we ran years ago, something that really seemed to connect with the community or fulfill a need, we insist that we’ve got to keep running that program.

And if, by chance, people no longer respond to that program like they once did, we don’t consider cancelling it. And we certainly don’t suggest that maybe it no longer fulfills the need that it once did or that society has changed so much that it just doesn’t work for people anymore.

What do we do? We criticize the people who are trying to run it now – maybe they’re not trying hard enough or maybe they don’t do it right, which is to say in the ways that we used to do it.

We’ve Never Done It Like That

And the other part of that is how we react when somebody suggests that we do something new or do it differently. I think we have all heard the refrain that goes up immediately: “We’ve never done it like that before.” And when the new thing runs into some inevitable roadblock or problem, we don’t give it a fraction of the patience or extra effort that we do to the thing that we always used to do that isn’t working so well anymore.

But, more than anything else, we judge the present of the church by the past. For example, every church I have been at over my whole career has felt embarrassed by and even apologized for its Sunday School. In many cases, this is despite the fact that they have an active and engaged group of children in the church. They have great teachers and successful activities. So, why do they feel embarrassed?

How Sunday School Used to Be

Well, it is because they remember what Sunday School used to be back in the Baby Boom years. Oh, the stories I have heard. “We used to have so many kids that we had to pay the Fire Marshal off to look the other way.” “We had so many classes that one of them had to meet in the men’s bathroom.”

(That is a story that I have actually heard at St. Andrew's Hespeler.) There are stories of wonder to rival the tales of the children of Israel in the wilderness.

And when that is how you define a successful Sunday School, anything smaller than having to pay off the fire marshal is just not going to measure up. So, is it any wonder people have a hard time seeing the success that they actually have?

What Is Success?

What's more, I am not entirely sure those Sunday Schools were the success we all thought they were. Yes, they were a lot of fun, and people got a lot of meaning out of them, but we should ask what the definition of success is. Is it to fill up classrooms and men's bathrooms? Or is it to develop Christians who will benefit from walking in the faith their whole lives long?

I think it is the latter and if it is, then we have to reckon with the fact that the generation of children that filled our church classrooms and gymnasiums in the Baby Boom years is the same generation of adults that abandoned the church in greater numbers than any generation before it. I wouldn't lay all of the blame for that at the door of the Sunday School, of course. But it should at the very least make us pause to re-evaluate our definition of a successful Christian Education program.

So we often focus on the past to honour the legacy. But if we focus in the wrong ways, it can actually compromise our present life. It can lead to judgement and disappointment where none is merited. It can make us focus on recreating the church that we remember from the past rather than building the church that is needed for the present moment. We can end up ransoming our future to pay for our past.

Deuteronomy's Tribute

So I think that whoever added the final chapter of Deuteronomy found a better tribute to the legacy of Moses. He didn't tell us that God made Moses look back. He told us that God showed Moses what lay ahead. **"The LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar."**

This makes it clear that Moses' legacy is not what he did. It is what he made possible. And what he made possible was for his people to live free in their land into the future. The successes and the failures of the past had to fade away before that. And it didn't matter that Moses wouldn't get to live through any of it – that the closest he would get was this glimpse from the top of Mount Nebo. The future would be his legacy, not the past.

Burial of Moses

This point is given extra emphasis when we are told that God buried Moses. **"Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day."** This might seem to contradict what I just said because it says that Moses was to be buried outside of the land for which he had done everything.

It would contradict if some great mausoleum were built for Moses in that valley in the land of Moab. Then the people would return there to celebrate his legacy and remember the past. But there

was no memorial; no one knew where he was buried at all. So there was no place to go back to. That is the point.

The only way that the people of Israel would have to truly honour the memory of their great leader was to live out the vision that he lived for and died for in the new land that God was giving them.

Celebrating Our Legacy

So here we are, gathered to celebrate the 171-year legacy of a congregation that has worshipped in this place for 116 years. What do you think is the best way to honour that legacy? We don't forget our past, of course. We honour the memory of all those who have gone before and their faith and their ministry and service.

But let us not build the kind of memorial that God didn't let the people of Israel build for Moses on Mount Nebo. Let us not build something that we have to keep coming back to. Let us especially not build a mausoleum to their accomplishments that will cause us to judge or reject new possibilities because they do not resemble the accomplishments of the past.

Moses Not Permitted to Enter

Moses was not permitted to enter into the future that had been promised. And I know that often seems unfair. He did so much and worked so hard to make it possible. How could he only be permitted to see it from a distance? Even the Bible struggles with this notion of Moses not making it in, offering different and conflicting reasons for why he wasn't allowed to enter.

But I think that element is in the story to remind us of an important principle. If the church has its priorities straight, we will all be committed to acting and working for goals that we may not see come to fruition for our own sake. We work for a future we may not enjoy ourselves.

Something Bigger Than You

It is not, of course, that you don't personally get anything out of your participation in the life of the church. If that is not happening, we are definitely not doing church right. But your growth, your fulfillment, your comfort and blessing cannot be the only reason for your participation. It has to be about something bigger than you. It has to be about something bigger than me. It has to be about a future that we may not be able to participate in.

That is the legacy we have received from those who have gone before and that is the legacy we need to be willing to work for. That is why Moses went up Mount Nebo to look forward, not to look back.