

June 21,2020

"A Tough Act to Follow"

Transitions SMPC

The next two weeks, I hope to lift up two very different characters from our Old Testament stories, and think of their lives in terms of transitions -

We are all in a transition in one form or another now that our lives have been very much affected by life with a pandemic. But even moreso, maybe big life transitions are coming for some, or there are changes that we want to try and accomplish but don't seem able to do. Or perhaps there is a ministry or a mission that we know God wants us to make.

Our church is in transition, so I want to start to think about that in terms of some of these important stories of faith.

This week is about Joshua, and next is about Jonah.

Saint Mark uses the phrase a Community of Spirit and Service, and really no matter who we are, I think we each seek to have a unique ministry in our lives, a mission that we carry out. Sharing the gospel, living the word, serving the world are all things that God would have us seek to do.

I always felt that one of the keys to a good life was to let God use you and the special talents that you have. It is an incredible thing to feel that you have been a part of God's plan somehow.

The problem is that sometimes we know God wants to use us but something is keeping us from going ahead. Maybe we lack the confidence to do what God asks us to do, maybe there are other things preventing us. Maybe it requires too much change for our comfort level.

Well, this is a situation that in the Old Testament, Joshua encountered. During that time, God's people were in what you might call a transition time -- wondering what lay ahead of them in the future. How would God continue to care for them, and prepare them for what came next?

Joshua himself was in a transition, as we will discover. How would he proceed into the future that God wanted for him?

Now being a transitional pastor, which is what they like to call us Interims these days, I know and you know that SMPC is in a transition between a long time pastor, and a future that God wants for us. So knowing that, I pay special attention to passages like this one to see what God might have to say to us during this time.

And next week, I am going to life up another kind of transitional passage for us to think about.

But first today, I would like to look at spiritual lessons from the life of Joshua, really starting from the very beginning of Joshua's story - chapter 1 and verse 1 which was read for us today.

Joshua was a great leader, but he had a problem early on with confidence. So Joshua chapter 1 is a kind of a motivational talk from God - at least 4 times in these verses, God says - be strong and courageous or some would say, be confident. Don't be discouraged.

IN these verses are some spiritual guidelines if you are in a transitional time or in an uncertain time as Joshua was. Guidelines that could apply to our life as a community of spirit and service as well.

But before we quickly get into that, why do you think Joshua lacked confidence? Well there were two pretty good reasons. First, remember he succeeded Moses. He

was the guy who had to follow Moses! How would you like to do that?

The last verses before Joshua's book, essentially say, "For no one had the mighty power or performed the awesome deed that Moses did"!

Just great - now here is Joshua, and he has to follow that! Because of a glorious past he worries about the future. Sometimes we do that in the church too - we worry too much about how we did it in the past and think, we could never duplicate that, how could we possibly do it a little differently or even exceed it?

The second reason he may have struggled with confidence was the assignment that God gave to him. God said, "Now Moses is dead, I want you to lead the people into the promised land" It is filled with at least 7 enemy nations, all of them stronger and better armed than you.

And go there with a group of people who have been wandering around the desert for 40 years because they are afraid. That is your task, now let's go!

Anyone signing up for this one? Well fortunately for Joshua, God gives him some direction and motivation for his confidence. We could all use this too, in this unusual time.

FIRST - LET GO OF DOUBT

Doubt can something that gets in the way of confidence. The book of James in the NT says that anyone who doubts is like a wave on the sea - you are just pushed to and fro. God gives some good reasons to Joshua to encourage him to let go of his doubt.

It seems that God is trying to convince Joshua not to worry about this massive task in front of him, which he is worried about. Joshua is learning that doubts are a choice in the way we approach something.

One commentator said it in a memorable way. He said most people doubt their beliefs and believe their doubts. Think about that sometime!

What was behind all the doubt for Joshua? Well we alluded to it already, comparing yourself to others is always a dangerous thing. God says that you and I are unique, not exactly like anyone in the world. So the danger in comparing ourselves is that we can be discouraged because they seem so much better than us or we can feel superior since we seem so much better than them. Either way is a path to a spiritual dead end.

I remember this so well from our first church as Student Pastors, we served a little church in the mountains of PA, about 20-25 people were there in the 11am worship and often a very nice lady would come in to church and make a point of telling me she just watched Robert Shuller on tv from the fabulous Crystal Cathedral and the message was incredible and he interviewed tv stars and the music was great, and now she was here to hear what I had to say. Now I am sure that Hour of Power was great for her, but

what was I as a Seminary student in a little church with an out of tune piano and no air conditioning supposed to do? I can't follow that act.

But after a few weeks, I realized that if I would just be myself, God would honor that.

Another cause of doubt would be past failures past mistakes. If God only knew the times I messed up, God would never ask me to do this important thing. God only uses perfect people, right?

Look at the heroes of the Bible. David was an adulterer, Jacob a thief, Abraham gave his wife away, Saul of Tarsus a religious persecutor before becoming Paul the apostle of grace.

Peter was a hard living fisherman. There aren't any perfect people. God always says it doesn't matter so much where you have been, it matters where you are going. So Let go of Doubt!

SECOND - CLAIM A PROMISE

The Bible is full of promises. One writer said that he counted over 7,000 promises in the context of the Bible. And promises are a key theme in the life of Joshua. In verse three, God already comforts Joshua by saying, "Don't worry, this promise I made to Moses is also for you."

And we do remember, it is called the promised land after all. At the end of his life, and the end of this book, Joshua looks back in verse 23:14 and reflects on Gods promises: "You know that not one of all the good promises God gave us has failed." Not one.

That is a kind of description of a successful life -not perfection, but in the beginning Joshua says, how can I do this look at the odds, look who I have to follow, etc.

And God says simply I have a promise for your life. And Joshua chooses to accept that and it makes all the difference.

What about us? What is God promising for us in these strange days we are living through? How do we translate these promises?

What is God's promise for this community of faith as we live out our discipleship?

THIRD -LAUNCH OUT IN FAITH

You hear people say that the time comes eventually you have to make the decision to go for it no matter what the circumstances. That happened to Joshua - he had to take the plunge - literally.

Because for the children of Israel to go into the promised land they had to cross a river. - the Jordan river. Now last week I was thinking about bridges, so I just wonder which bridge did they use to cross the Jordan? I grew up in Pittsburgh where there are hundreds of bridges. But you know what? - there wasn't a single bridge they could use to get over the Jordan back then.

The river could be 100 feet wide, or much wider if it was wet season. At least 20 feet deep.

So the good news is that God tells Joshua, I am going to do a miracle to get you across. Now this is much less famous than Moses' parting of the red sea, after all he is a tough act to follow, but God performs this miracle to get them across.

With Moses, the sea parts and they walk through, but here God makes it harder on Joshua, of course. God says start walking through first, then the waters will recede. So Joshua and the leaders begin walking in the water up to their ankles and knees and waist, and thinking OK any time now Yahweh!

We read later in the book, that what God does is dam the water upstream, but all the water is still rushing downstream as they were crossing. But God's timing is perfect, and the waters recede and they crossed the Jordan river.

That is a case of the first step is always the hardest. Maybe that is where the expression, "Wade into the problem" comes from. The step of planning for the

future, thinking about the ministry of our church or even ourselves. We always ask the question like Joshua, how are we going to walk into the future that God has planned for us?

IN a sense, God is asking us to take a risk to take a step of faith. Ecclesiastes 11 says basically if you wait for only ideal conditions you will never get anything done. Well these are less than ideal conditions. So why not launch out in faith. If you feel called to a ministry, to share where you feel Saint Mark is called to go. Why not today.

The first step can be tough. Just like the Jordan river.

But God created us for good works, to trust in God. So let go of doubt, claim that promise and launch out in faith!

May it be so. Amen.