

Pilgrimage 11

Joshua 1:1–9 (NRSV)

God's Commission to Joshua

Preached 3/25/2018, Palm Sunday, at St. Andrew's UMC

1 After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, 2 "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. 3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 4 From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. 5 No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. 9 I hereby

command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

As I read through Dt. 27 to Joshua 12, I was struck by a phrase that kept popping up. The phrase is “be strong and courageous.” There are variations on the phrase: “Don’t be afraid,” “Be brave and strong.” And when you start reading other translations courageous becomes fearless, or bold. “Don’t be terrified,” becomes, “Don’t be dismayed.” In the 16 chapter span between where Moses dies, and Joshua takes over, and the end of Joshua 12, this admonition to “be strong and courageous” occurs no less than eleven times, often in rapid succession.

I love that phrase “be strong and courageous.” I can remember as a kid when I was probably 8-9 years old I had a plastic coin purse with that phrase printed on it. I picked it up from church somewhere along the way. Even as a child I remember thinking, that’s a cool Bible verse.

But as an adult, something doesn’t add up. I read these passages differently. I read the first verses from Joshua 1 and read all the good things that God is ready to deliver into the hands of Joshua and Israel. Joshua 1:3–5 (NRSV) *3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 4 From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. 5 No one shall be able to stand*

against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.

When I read that and put myself in the place of Joshua, I think, well this is going to be a cakewalk. This is like winning the powerball lottery. This is easy street. Then all the “be strong and courageous” stuff starts coming out.

Why would the Lord have to repeat over and over this encouragement to be brave and strong if the Lord was dropping all these goodies into the lap of Israel? If I’m Joshua I start asking myself, “Why is the Lord reminding me so often not to be afraid? Hey God, I was fine with everything until you told me like 1,000 times not to be afraid. Now I’m worried.” That’s like being on a plane where the pilot comes on the intercom every 10 minutes and says, “Ladies and gentleman, there is absolutely nothing to worry about. Remain calm.” I can’t think of a better way to freak out people on a plane.

Maybe God knows something about human nature. Maybe God knows something about how we experience the intersection of the world and the Kingdom of God. That intersection is typically unsettling at the very least, and at extremes that intersection of the world and the Kingdom of God will take one’s life.

What this means is that when we’re on the cusp of something that God wants us to do, it can be scary. We still carry all the worldly concerns of success, ease, happiness, wealth, power, and control within us. So to do a trust fall into God’s arms often feels a little counter-intuitive.

We see this even in Jesus. On Palm Sunday Jesus enters into Jerusalem with the acclamation of the crowd. The crowd is excited, but it's hard to get a read on Jesus. He doesn't say anything. There's no rally with speeches at the end of the parade. One might think that with a crowd like this he would teach the Sermon on the Palms. But, we get nothing. After the parade Jesus simply goes to the Temple, looks around, and goes to where he's staying with the Twelve.

If you scan what Jesus does say and teach the last week of his life in Mark's gospel, you start to get the picture that the humanity of Jesus knew that something hard lay ahead of him. You start to get the idea that the tension in the air was palpable. Jesus teaches a strange parable about withering fig trees. He then tells a parable in which the heir of a vineyard is accosted and killed by the tenant farmers. Then Jesus goes, as they say, from preachin' to meddlin' and talks about taxes. He engages the religious authorities on a question about resurrection. He reflects on the greatest commandment by reciting the Shema. And he predicts the destruction of the Temple. These are dour, foreboding scenes. Even if Jesus' reflection on resurrection and the Shema seem like counter-balances, they provide no worldly guarantees.

Jesus knows that the sinful world and the Kingdom of God are getting ready to collide. He tells the disciples this vision of how everything is going to fall apart before things get better. At the height of this tension we find Jesus in the Garden of

Gethsemane, pleading for his friends to stay awake and help him pray. Jesus is human, and he feels anxiety just like you and I do.

Despite this great anxiety, Jesus continues to take one step after another. While you and I will not be called upon to be crucified for the world, we will be asked to take up our cross. We will be asked to stand in that intersection between the world and the Kingdom of God and take the next step with strength and courage like Joshua and Jesus. The name Jesus, by the way, is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua.

I applaud the witness that Gayle Smith's gave last week. What I appreciated about what she said was that even while she feels like she's pursuing God's call in her life by resigning her position here to take on ministry through her non-profit, it's scary.

My wife and I celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary on Tuesday. I can remember on the day of our wedding, my arms going numb. I knew that marrying Julie was the best thing I could do. We both believed that we were pursuing God's call in our lives. But, there was enough of the world in me to make my arms go numb and I just had to put one foot in front of the other.

Last Saturday we paid tribute to Rev. Sam Brown. During the service several people talked about his witness to the things he believed in, and the consequences he paid for speaking up for those things. His wife summed it up beautifully at the end by saying, "Sam would say that we don't have to be afraid. But there is a price to pay."

Where is God leading you? What is God calling you to do? If it seems a little scary, you're in good company. You're in the company of those who heard the Lord speak to them by saying, "Be strong and courageous." Most of the time our greatest challenge in faith isn't taking on the whole world at once. In my life the greatest challenge is usually simply taking the next step that's in front of me, trusting that God is faithful and will continue redeeming the world no matter what.