

Headed to the Promised Land

Joshua 1:1-9

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Comedian Stephen Colbert has said, "There is an old saying about those who forget history. I don't remember it, but it's good." That's kind of what we do with the Bible, isn't it, get a little fuzzy on the details, but know it's good. Well, we're trying to do a little remembering this summer, remembering the history of journeys made in the Bible. We began with the journey of Abraham, called to a new place and to be a blessing to the ends of the earth. We followed with the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, on a God-led journey through the sea and away from harm. Last week we read the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness, maintained through their desperation by the grace of God and the leadership of Moses.

Early in their wilderness wandering, the Lord prepared to send the Israelites into the promised land. The Lord instructed them to send twelve spies to Canaan to see what is in store for the people. Among those spies was a young man named Joshua son of Nun. 10 of those spies came back to confirm that the promised land is filled with milk and honey, as promised, but that the Canaanite tribes were too strong to overcome. Joshua disagreed with the other spies, claiming that with God's help they could take the land that had been promised to them. But the Lord had heard the despairing of the others, and punished their unbelief with 40 years in the wilderness, offering some "remedial coursework" in faithfulness and obedience.

Moses died, and an era in the history of Israel ended. In Abraham the people were called, through Moses they were delivered from slavery and hunger and even faithlessness, and it was time for a new leader to be called, with particular qualities for the next stage of the journey of God's people.

Joshua 1:1-9 (NRSV)

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. 3Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 4From 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. 5No 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. 6Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 7Only 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. 8This 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. 9I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

Billy Graham tells of a time, during the early years of his preaching ministry, when he was due to lead a crusade meeting in a town in South Carolina, and he needed to mail a letter. He asked a little boy in the main street how he could get to the post office. After the boy had given him directions, Billy said, "If you come to the central Baptist church tonight, I'll tell you how to get to heaven." The boy replied, "No thanks, Mister, you don't even know how to get to the post office!"

The Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years, wondering how they could get to the promised land. They knew where it was, across the Jordan, but they had no idea how they could inherit land occupied by the mighty Canaanites. The way in was dangerous, and they didn't have confidence that this plan was going to work. Perhaps they got used to wandering in the wilderness, and the promised land grew further away from their hopes. Perhaps after so much hardship, a land filled with milk and honey and prosperity was just too hard to imagine anymore.

We celebrate our great and god-blessed nation, the United States of America, today, on the same day that we read about Joshua, the one called to lead the people to the promised land. The promised land in our contemporary Christian American lives is different than a territory “over there,” but we use words like the kingdom and peace and justice to point to that place for us. We have a sense that we need to go somewhere, and we rehearse going there every week in church, crossing over the River Jordan, through the baptismal waters of our calling, to that place over there where prosperity and security and justice and peace are more than words, they’re descriptions. And we don’t have to look far to realize that we’re not there yet.

But the Lord, through Joshua, gave the Israelites the green light. Arise and pass over the Jordan River, to the land I am giving you. I will be with you, and I will not fail or forsake you. Just as when times were tough with Moses, in Egypt and in the wilderness, so I will be with you as you go to the promised land. No one shall be able to stand against you.

This very passage of the promised land was used to justify the European immigrants taking the land from the native Americans. It is part of our history, and reminds of the caricature by comedian Eddie Izzard, upon taking the land. People arrive on ships, walk up the beach to the hills, plant a flag and say, “I declare this the land of the king! (Turn to the side...) Oh, hello there.” “You can’t declare this land anything, we were here first!” “Oh... well... but do you have a flag?”

But if we’re honest about things, heading to the promised land from where we stand involves seizing territory and overcoming great odds, too, doesn’t it? We must seize the collective consciousness of a nation and a world, and get us focused less on winning and wealth and more on loving and relationship, less focused on celebrity and style and more on who we are and what we do, less on fighting and more on listening. And the journey from here to there, from now to God’s reign on earth, is not easy. It involves getting strong enough to love strangers and enemies, and courageous enough to speak the truth to powerful people and institutions. Strong enough to be disciplined, and courageous enough to spread selfless, giving love.

Be strong and courageous is a refrain of our text today, and certainly describes qualities we need to even entertain a world of justice and peace and love on earth. But the Lord offers a qualifying and clarifying remark about strength and courage to Joshua that we would do well to listen to. Be strong and very courageous, says the Lord, being careful to act in accordance with the law, do not turn from it. The book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, meditate on it day and night, so that you may act accordingly. It would seem that God, knowing the arduous journey from now to kingdom come, has offered a vehicle to carry us all from here to there. Commandment, order, a specified way of being so that we can remain faithful to God and one another. The law is full of specificity and guidance to the Israelites to love God with everything they are and to love neighbors and strangers likewise.

We do well to remember, on this day that we celebrate our national independence and the principles of freedom and justice for which it stands, that thanks be to God and the sacrifices of many we are free from tyranny, but we are also, in a very different sense, free in this blessed place to serve God and one another in the way we have been shown, in the story of Israel and the story of Jesus Christ. This is the Judeo-Christian understanding of freedom, the one we should be mindful of today, that we are free, finally and at long last free to serve.

Preacher Fred Craddock tells a story about the time he almost met Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer, the great German-French theologian, biblical scholar, doctor, and humanitarian, was also a renowned organist. In 1949, college student Craddock heard Schweitzer was coming to the US for the first time to give an organ recital in Cleveland. Craddock had just finished reading Schweitzer’s controversial book, “The Quest of the Historical Jesus,” and he had a legal pad filled with critiques of the author’s work. Especially that Schweitzer’s search for the Jesus of history left the reader with no reason to worship. “Not enough Jesus to believe in”, he wrote on his pad, and Craddock bought a bus ticket to Cleveland, where he would confront Albert Schweitzer and his watered-down 20th century pseudo-intellectual protestant theology.

All through the recital, Craddock anxiously waited for his moment to take Schweitzer to task for his paper-thin Jesus. Finally, the concert ended and Craddock ran down to the gathering space and found a seat on the front row, center. Legal pad full of questions in his now anxiously shaking hands. It was then that Albert Schweitzer entered the room, and Craddock tells the rest of the story like this. “He was 75 years old, and much taller than I had expected,” Craddock says, “Fuzzy face, bushy hair, French accent.” Schweitzer stepped to the podium: “I appreciate the hospitality of you all and of this church. I’d like to stay longer and take questions, but I can’t. My patients in Africa need me. They are dying, children and their mothers and fathers, dying at home. I have to go. But if you have the love of Jesus in your heart, maybe you will come with me?” With that, Schweitzer walked out of the room. Craddock looked down at his legal pad filled to the margins with criticism.¹ We can all talk and debate about theology and biblical interpretation all day long, but there is something about our faith that must be lived in order to be understood. This is how commandment works, guiding us to experience and share the blessing that lies behind living what we believe.

It’s up to you now, says the Lord, everybody rise up and pass over the Jordan, to the promised land. I will be with you, as I’ve always been, says the Lord, but you must be strong and courageous, very courageous, and follow the law that was given to you, for then you will be successful, then you will see that I am the Lord your God, the Lord your God with a plan.

¹ Thanks to Rev. Chris Henry, Interim Head of Staff at Morningside Presbyterian Church, for this great reference to an old story of Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, Professor Emeritus of Candler School of Theology.