

Pursuing the Promise: 1. Be strong and courageous

Joshua 1:7-9

August 7, 2020

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We've all learned something about uncertainty in these past six months. What we've experienced thus far in 2020 is unlike anything anyone before us has experienced which is why there is no textbook to guide us. Though the future may feel uncertain, being in a place where I've felt uncertain is not a new experience for me. I call it "the day after" experience. The day after we bought the car. The day after we bought the house. The day after I graduated from college and I realized I did not know what I wanted to do next – and my parents had made it clear I wasn't coming home! The day after Amanda and I were married and I realized this is what I wanted but it meant everything wasn't going to be how I wanted it to be. The day after our first child was born. The first day was a happy, joyful day, but then I realized the hospital was going to send her home with us and I didn't know how to be a Dad. Or it's day after you lost your job, realizing that a lot of other people who used to do what you did have also lost their job and you are all looking for another one. Or, it's the day after you received the plan for this next school year with a schedule unlike anything your family has experienced. How is it all going to work? You know there will be a tomorrow but that tomorrow is not at all clear. There are times when music can express what words alone cannot. Someone sent me this song that expresses where many of us are. [video of a music teacher screaming] I think I have that song memorized!

This uncertainty or we might call it fear is actually part of living. We'd like everything to be certain or guaranteed, but life does not work that way. We can't avoid what's next – even if we could, too many of life's circumstances cannot be avoided. I guess you could pretend this coronavirus does not exist, but where would that take you? The challenge before us is getting from here to there. And when I turn to the Old Testament book of Joshua, that's where I find wisdom and direction for the journey – and the tools to equip us as we step into the unknown. For the next four weeks, I'd like us to focus on 4 different stories from his life as a template for how we can pursue a promise – God's promise – that will take us from where we are to where God wants us to go.

As the Old Testament book of Joshua begins, Joshua and the people of Israel have a river to cross. They have lived on one side of the river for forty years and it is time to live into the other side and all of the fears and uncertainties that they know are on the other side. The river itself is not difficult to cross. For much of the year, it is a shallow, muddy stream. There is little risk involved in crossing the river, but symbolically, it is a big deal. It is the way to reach the Promised Land – the land that God promised to them. Let's review the history. Forty years earlier, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to this same river, the Jordan River. And when they reached this same spot, Moses sent Joshua and Caleb and ten others across the river to spy on the Canaanites who were living there. And when they returned, they reported to Moses that the land was in fact flowing with "milk and honey" just as God promised, but the people living there were like giants, making them feel like grasshoppers. And all but Joshua and Caleb felt it was too risky, too threatening to cross the river. And so the entire nation of Israel turned back and for the next forty years they wandered in a desert wilderness. But now, everyone who had been to this spot forty years earlier has died. Moses is dead. Only Joshua and Caleb and a new generation of people who have carried with them the stories of what happened forty years earlier. Here is Joshua, hand-picked by Moses as his successor, and God has given him the task of leading the people into the Promised Land. But there is a river to cross.

So Joshua will know that this is not just his journey or Israelites journey to make, God says: **As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.** I will be with you. This is the same promise God made to Abraham and to Isaac. The promise repeated to Moses. A promise that God would make to Israel when they are in exile. A promise repeated to Mary when given her implausible commission as the mother of the Messiah. And a promise Jesus reiterates when sending disciples to disciple the world. God will make sure things work out, so **be strong and courageous.**

There is a river to cross. This is the moment between the known and the unknown. Susan Beaumont calls this **liminal space**. Liminal is a word that comes from the Latin word, limen, which means threshold. It is the crossing over space where you have left something behind, and yet you are not fully in something else. Our comfort zone is to go back to the familiar – even if the familiar wasn't all that great. The Israelites had been hearing about the Promised Land for 40 years – and also how giants lived there, but even though living in a desert wilderness was difficult, the wilderness was all they've ever known. But now they are at the river's edge. Liminal space and it can be a fear filled place to be. I remember working in an office when computers arrived for the first time. Up until that point, typewriters were all we had – and for the people in our office, a computer was like learning another language – a language that seemed unnecessary and intimidating. So for weeks the computers sat on desks collecting dust until one day everyone some entered the office and removed all of the typewriters. The next morning there was anger and fear and a few choice words, but the typewriters never returned. There was a river to cross. What is your river? That line you don't want to cross. That point that will take you to a place you've never been. What is it that is keeping you from putting your foot in the water?

Last week, I watched the movie, Hoosiers, once again. The movie came out in 1986 and quickly became one of the classic sports movies of all time. The movie is based on the true story of a basketball team from an Indiana high school of just 161 students that overcomes incredible odds and makes it all the way to the Indian state basketball championship where they face this school that is more than ten times bigger than they are, before a huge crowd in Indian University's main arena, which is 100 times bigger than anything they've ever played in before. Watch what happens when Gene Hackman, who plays the coach, walks the team into the arena the day before the game. [video – Hoosiers] Just like their home court, the basket is still 10 feet from the floor, the free throw line is still 16 feet from the basket. You may be afraid. The place where you are standing may be unlike anything you have faced before. But the basics haven't changed.

What do you do when you have come to a place you've never been and you've never felt less equipped, less ready, less certain than you are right now. Be courageous? You're not feeling it. What do you do when you feel weak and unworthy and inadequate and you want to pull the covers up over your head and stay with what feels comfortable and familiar? You get up and go anyway. 1. You **go scared**. Fear is not a bad thing. It's not seeing something scary and then running away. Fear is a sign that there's something bold. Whenever you step outside your comfort zone which is where all impactful things happen – the moment you step outside your comfort zone, there are new fears. Of course, you are scared. You've never been there and don't know how it will go. I still remember the theme of my high school graduation: This is the first day of the rest of your life. That theme has been used thousands of times for thousands of different settings. But on the day of my high school graduation, it was personal. This is the first day of the rest of your life. In other words, Steve, you are done here. You can't stay here. It may be what you've known for the past twelve years, but today you take that first step into the unknown. I took that step, not because I had certainty about the future and not because I wasn't nervous about the unknown. I took that step scared. And so did Joshua. In fact, more than

anyone else, he had been to the other side of the river and knew the risks. He crossed the river anyway. Fear will accompany you every step of the way, at every level of success – do it anyway.

A few weeks ago, I had my annual performance review with our district superintendent and as you might guess most of our conversation related to the uncertainty of 2020 and what could be ahead. And he asked, how are you managing? And this is number 2. **Lean into the fundamentals.** It's what Gene Hackman was saying to his basketball team. The basics haven't changed. Lean into the fundamental practices that have gotten you to this point. And my answer to our district superintendent was as long as I am leaning into the fundamentals, it is well with my soul. The fundamentals? Eat well, sleep well, exercise well, and pray well. The practices that have sustained me to this point will be the practices that will sustain me through this liminal space. Moses had been Joshua's mentor, and now Joshua would need to lean into those practices he had learned from Moses.

And 3. **Be bold.** The time had come to enter the Promised Land, but the Jordan River was before them – no bridges, no boats to ferry the hundreds of thousands of people across the river, no way around it, no way over it, must walk through it. But the river is at flood stage. I went on the Internet to get some idea of what this must have looked like and I found this picture of the Jordan River at flood stage. [slide] Do you know what fear looks like? Folks, we are crossing this river – and forty years ago when I entered the land there were giants on the other side of this river. And Joshua says to the people: **“Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.”** (Joshua 3:5) In other words, what God did at the Red Sea, God will do again tomorrow at the Jordan River. Do you think anyone had doubts? Do you think anyone wanted to turn back? What's before is all uncertain. Go scared. Lean into the fundamentals. Be bold.

Homework: Do something hard this week. Try something new. You may fail, but that's okay. Be strong and courageous. God will be with you every step of the way.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 9, 2020

Weekly Prayer: O Lord, all of life is a journey. As we follow your direction, deliver us, sustain us, and hold us in our travels. When the way ahead is uncertain and frightening, remind us of your guiding presence--forever offered to us. All power and might are forever in your hand. May we always seek to grasp hold of that living hand through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Monday, August 10

Scripture: Exodus 17:8-16

Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some men for us and go fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I'll stand on top of the hill with the shepherd's rod of God in my hand.”¹ So Joshua did as Moses told him. He fought with Amalek while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel would start winning the battle. Whenever Moses lowered his hand, Amalek would start winning. But Moses' hands grew tired. So they took a stone and put it under Moses so he could sit down on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on each side of him so that his hands remained steady until sunset. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his army with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a reminder on a scroll and read it to Joshua: I will completely wipe out the memory of Amalek under the sky.” Moses built an altar there and called it, “The LORD is my

banner.” He said, “The power of the LORD’s banner! The LORD is at war with Amalek in every generation.”

Observation: This is the first time that Joshua is mentioned in the Bible. He was born into slavery in Egypt, his freedom won by Moses when Pharaoh released the Israelites. In the wilderness, Moses selected Joshua as a trusted military leader. These experiences would prepare him for even greater responsibilities when he became Moses’ successor.

Application: The staff in Moses’ hand was a symbol of God’s presence. By lifting his hands, Moses was appealing to God for help. How do you appeal for God’s help in times of trouble? In verse 14, Moses was told to write a message to be read to Joshua at a later time. Why would it be important for Joshua to hear this? Could it be that God was already preparing Joshua for what would happen in the future? How has God prepared you for what was yet to come?

Prayer: God, how grateful I am that you provide guidance and direction, even when I am not aware of your guidance. I can look back and realize you have been a guiding force throughout my life. Help me to be open and available to your desires for my life. Amen.

Tuesday, August 11

Scripture: Numbers 13:16-33

These are the names of the men whom Moses sent out to explore the land. Moses changed the name of Hoshea, Nun’s son, to Joshua. When Moses sent them out to explore the land of Canaan, he said to them, “Go up there into the arid southern plain and into the mountains. You must inspect the land. What is it like? Are the people who live in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the land in which they live good or bad? Are the towns in which they live camps or fortresses? Is the land rich or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Be courageous and bring back the land’s fruit.” It was the season of the first ripe grapes. They went up and explored the land from the Zin desert to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. They went up into the arid southern plain and entered Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of the Anakites, lived. (Hebron was built seven years before Tanis in Egypt.) Then they entered the Cluster ravine, cut down from there a branch with one cluster of grapes, and carried it on a pole between them. They also took pomegranates and figs. That place was called the Cluster ravine because of the cluster of grapes that the Israelites cut down from there.

They returned from exploring the land after forty days. They went directly to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Paran desert at Kadesh. They brought back a report to them and to the entire community and showed them the land’s fruit. Then they gave their report: “We entered the land to which you sent us. It’s actually full of milk and honey, and this is its fruit. There are, however, powerful people who live in the land. The cities have huge fortifications. And we even saw the descendants of the Anakites there. The Amalekites live in the land of the arid southern plain; the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the mountains; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan.” Now Caleb calmed the people before Moses and said, “We must go up and take possession of it, because we are more than able to do it.” But the men who went up with him said, “We can’t go up against the people because they are stronger than we.” They started a rumor about the land that they had explored, telling the Israelites, “The land that we crossed over to explore is a land that devours its residents. All the people we saw in it are huge men. We saw there the Nephilim (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We saw ourselves as grasshoppers, and that’s how we appeared to them.”

Observation: The Israelites reached the border of the Promised Land. Moses selected twelve spies, one from each of the twelve tribes, to enter the land and investigate what lay ahead. They

all return with a report that confirmed what God promised. It was a land flowing with “milk and honey.” That’s where they agree. Ten of the twelve advise against going there. Only Caleb and Joshua advocate for what God directed.

Application: Where do you see fear and courage at work in this story? How could the same people look at the same thing and see the same thing but come away with very different responses? Have you ever found courage where others experienced fear? Moses changed Joshua’s name. Hoshea, which means “salvation,” became Joshua, which means “the Lord saves”. Once again, this verse announced something in the future – not only the leadership that Joshua would provide, but the names Joshua and Jesus are the same words in Greek. What has someone seen in you that would be a preview of who you would become?

Prayer: God, grant me the wisdom to see where I am and where you would like me to go. Then grant me the courage to go, even when fear would call me to stay where I am. In these days of uncertainty, let me feel the assurance of your presence. Amen.

Wednesday, August 12

Scripture: Joshua 1:6-9

Be brave and strong, because you are the one who will help this people take possession of the land, which I pledged to give to their ancestors. “Be very brave and strong as you carefully obey all of the Instruction that Moses my servant commanded you. Don’t deviate even a bit from it, either to the right or left. Then you will have success wherever you go. Never stop speaking about this Instruction scroll. Recite it day and night so you can carefully obey everything written in it. Then you will accomplish your objectives and you will succeed. I’ve commanded you to be brave and strong, haven’t I? Don’t be alarmed or terrified, because the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Observation: With the death of Moses, Joshua became the leader. God charged Joshua with the responsibility to lead the people where forty years earlier they had been unwilling to go. Four times in this chapter, we read the words “brave and strong.” These qualities will be required in order to accomplish what God has promised.

Application: Courage is not something that we manufacture within ourselves. It is a gift given by God to those who will surrender to God’s direction. Verse nine connects courage with God’s presence. God needs no invitation to be present, but how can an open invitation for God to be present in a particular situation give you courage? Fear is also very real in our lives. We live in a world with much that is uncertain, but fear loses its power in the presence of courage. Where do you need courage? How could you help someone find the source of courage in the presence of fear?

Prayer: Use me, O Lord, to be a witness to courage and strength in the face of all that is uncertain. Let me be a source of comfort and encouragement to others who feel lost and alone. Amen.

Thursday, August 13

Scripture: Joshua 1:13-18

“Remember the command that Moses the LORD’s servant gave you: ‘The LORD your God will give you rest and give you this land.’ Your wives, children, and cattle may remain in the land that Moses has given you on the east side of the Jordan. But all you brave fighters, organized

for war, must cross over in front of your fellow Israelites. You must help them until the LORD gives a rest like yours to your fellow Israelites and they too take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. Then you may return and take over the land that belongs to you, which Moses the LORD's servant has given you on the east side of the Jordan." They answered Joshua, "We will obey everything you have commanded us and go anywhere you send us. We will obey you in the same way that we obeyed Moses. Just let the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses! Anybody who stubbornly opposes what you declare and doesn't obey any of your commands will be put to death. Be brave and strong!"

Observation: The book of Joshua opens with a covenant entitling the Hebrews in Gilead to cross the Jordan River and settle in the land west of the river. The covenant was first introduced in Genesis (Genesis 11:27- 12:8). With the covenant, God established God's intent for goodness towards God's people. God always provides leadership to enable the fulfillment of covenant.

Application: When Joshua received his call to lead, he immediately executed his commission by granting land to tribes of Israel. The call put him in a position of great responsibility. His first step in leadership, however, was to seek God. How would this make a difference for those in positions of leadership? The people took possession of land for which they did not labor. This gift from God held great responsibility for the people (Joshua 24:1-33). I used to pray to own my own home and now I do, but home ownership brought challenges and at times caused me to doubt God's desire for my goodness. How can courage prompt you to live responsibly?

Prayer: God, you have been so good to me. This morning, I awoke to the blessing of a new day. Let my actions reflect my gratitude for what you have given me. Amen.

Friday, August 14

Scripture: Joshua 2:1-20, 6:22-25

Joshua, Nun's son, secretly sent two men as spies from Shittim. He said, "Go. Look over the land, especially Jericho." They set out and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab. They bedded down there. Someone told the king of Jericho, "Men from the Israelites have come here tonight to spy on the land." So the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab: "Send out the men who came to you, the ones who came to your house, because they have come to spy on the entire land."

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. Then she said, "Of course the men came to me. But I didn't know where they were from. The men left when it was time to close the gate at dark, but I don't know where the men went. Hurry! Chase after them! You might catch up with them." But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the flax stalks that she had laid out on the roof. The men from Jericho chased after them in the direction of the Jordan up to the fords. As soon as those chasing them went out, the gate was shut behind them.

Before the spies bedded down, Rahab went up to them on the roof. She said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Reed Sea in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below. Now, I have been loyal to you. So pledge to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal loyally with my family. Give me a sign of good faith. Spare the lives of

my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, along with everything they own. Rescue us from death.” The men said to her, “We swear by our own lives to secure yours. If you don’t reveal our mission, we will deal loyally and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land.”

So she lowered the spies on a rope through the window. Her house was on the outer side of the city wall, and she lived inside the wall. Then she said to them, “Go toward the highlands so that those chasing you don’t run into you. Hide there for three days until those chasing you return. Then you may go on your way.” The men said to her, “We won’t be responsible for this pledge you made us swear unless, when we come into the land, you tie this red woven cord in the window through which you lowered us. Gather your father, your mother, your brothers, and your whole family into the house with you. Those who go outside the doors of your house into the street will have only themselves to blame for their own deaths. We won’t be responsible. If anyone lays a hand on those who are with you in the house, we will take the blame for their death. But if you reveal our mission, we won’t be responsible for this pledge you made us swear.”

Joshua spoke to the two men who had scouted out the land. “Go to the prostitute’s house. Bring out the woman from there, along with everyone related to her, exactly as you pledged to her.” So the young men who had been spies went and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and everyone related to her. They brought her whole clan out and let them stay outside Israel’s camp. They burned the city and everything in it. But they put the silver and gold, along with the bronze and iron equipment, into the treasury of the LORD’s house. Joshua let Rahab the prostitute live, her family, and everyone related to her. So her family still lives among Israel today, because she hid the spies whom Joshua had sent to scout out Jericho.

Observation: Freed from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. When finally they reached the Jordan River, ready to cross over into Canaan, Joshua sent two spies to study the strategic city of Jericho. Rahab, a Canaanite woman, was presented with an opportunity. Would she shelter the men, even though they were “enemies” of her people? She chose to do what put her at risk. According to the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 1:5), her action led to her becoming one of Jesus’ ancestors.

Application: At first Rahab explained her actions pragmatically: “I know that the LORD has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us” (Joshua 2:9). Then she added, “The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.” (verse 11). When have you seen God work through a specific moment (an illness, family crisis or financial reverse) to lead you or someone close to you to greater faith?

Prayer: Lord God, the Bible doesn’t explain how your Spirit prepared Rahab’s heart for her part in your story—but there she was. Keep my heart open to you, and to the presence of others, knowing you are at work. Amen.

Saturday, August 15

Scripture: Psalm 37:1-7

Don’t get upset over evildoers; don’t be jealous of those who do wrong, because they will fade fast, like grass; they will wither like green vegetables. Trust the LORD and do good; live in the land, and farm faithfulness. Enjoy the LORD, and he will give what your heart asks. Commit your way to the LORD! Trust him! He will act and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like high noon. Be still before the LORD, and wait for him. Don’t get upset when someone gets ahead—someone who invents evil schemes.

Observation: Thousands of years ago, people of faith were struggling with issues that are still challenging for us today. Why is it that the wicked prosper and the faithful struggle? What is God's sense of justice? The writer of this psalm says, "Trust" and "do good," because God will ultimately set this right. "Hope in the LORD."

Application: In essence, the psalm asks us to focus on God and not on who is or is not getting ahead. What we see is the present moment, but God holds the future. This doesn't mean we wait for the wicked to get their just punishment, because that is also focusing on others. Focus on God. Trust. Be brave and strong. Commit your way to the LORD. Be still before the LORD. What helps you to maintain your focus on God? Establishing a daily practice such as this GPS helps us focus. One sign of your focus wandering from God is a sudden comparison with someone whom you feel is unfairly rewarded.

Prayer: Gracious God, restore in me a longing for you and an assurance of your love. Help me to trust in you and not be afraid. Give me the confidence that I need that you are always holding my life in your hands. Amen.