

Sermon Text for March 13, 2022

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Joshua 1:1-9 and Acts 1:6-11

“What’s next?”

As the tragedy in Ukraine continues to unfold I didn’t really have the heart to tell a cute story about anything at all but the searing question that I have running through my mind is what comes next for Russia? When will they stoop the invasion that is causing millions of refugee to flee their homeland to find refuge in neighboring welcoming countries. I wonder what will come next for Ukraine as they bravely dig in as they find themselves outmanned and outgunned. What come next for Belarus which is allowing the Russia troops to pour through their borders and as they assist the Russian army tactically and militarily while their economy falls apart and their people insist that this is not their war.

That question of what’s next is not only important for nation states involved in a war, but is also vitally important for individuals as we make our way through this journey of life. Last two day I was able to spend them with the confirmation kids and their dads. These kids are in the midst of an ending from childhood to adulthood where each one has to choose do I stand in front of the congregation and profess my faith in Jesus Christ, or is he not my Savior? If they do make that profession for themselves then they will begin a journey that has already been started, but finds itself in a completely new phase.

We all find ourselves in seasons of beginning and ending. As we transition at work from one job to another. Or if we transition from working to retirement. As we transition from children being home to empty nesters. As we transition from being healthy to now quite a few medical conditions are popping up and we don’t have any idea what comes next. We all want to know the answer to that question.

In both of our Scripture we people who are moving from the way things used to be and the way that God had intended them to be under a very, very strong leader, to now all of a sudden they are in charge. That question of what comes next is vital for them to be able to understand how they are to lead and in what direction are they to take the people that they are leading. Joshua takes over for Moses, who knew God face to face and was an incredibly difficult act to follow. And we have the disciples, the remaining 11 apostles who are starting their leadership without the physical presence of Jesus, who had incredibly difficult shoes to fill.

We find ourselves, as a church, in a season of beginning as this pandemic seems to be winding down and coming to an end. I have been telling people it will probably take about 2 years to find ourselves at the place where we were before the pandemic, we have lost some people and so we have to work with what we have. The question for me, and I think for all of us, is that now that we are starting over again, what comes next? What we will see is that a common factor in discerning what comes next is the assurance that Jesus is by our side as we make those next steps that loom before us. The more we spend time in the presence of the Lord, the more we will know what actually does come next. Let's read.

READ

Let's turn to our Joshua Scripture. Moses has just died and Joshua finds himself leading an entire nation which has a very specific task which is to transition from living in the wilderness to moving into the lands of other nations, defeating them, and then settling into those lands that they once occupied. He has never done that before. Moses should be the one who was doing this. But Moses has just died and Joshua basically finds himself by himself as this Scripture begins.

Listen to what God tells Joshua, listen to how God reassures Joshua as he begins this task of leadership: vs.5 – As I was with Moses, so I shall be with you, I will not fail you or forsake you. Vs.6 – Be strong and courageous. vs. 7 Only be strong and very courageous. Vs. 9 – I hereby command you, be strong and courageous, do not fear, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua, before you take this next step in your own life, before the nation of Israel takes another step forward with you leading them, there is something you need to know. I will not forsake and I will be with you wherever you go.

I'm wondering how many of you as you are about to embark in a new season of your life needed to hear that this morning. In what way are you wanting to know what comes next? God will probably not tell you what comes next, but he does tell you that He will be by your side as you make your way to your next step.

But how will we know that God is by our side? We also find that answer in Joshua. Look at vs.7 and 8, as God promises that he will be by our side he also says in 7 act in accordance with what Moses has taught you that I handed down to him, and then again in vs. 8 don't allow Scripture to depart from your mouth, you are to be steeped in it.

As pastors we borrow and take idea liberally and most of the time we don't give any credit to the person from whom we took their idea. I'm going to break character for a moment

but a few years back I officiated a wedding with Brett Foote and in his sermon he said a line that I knew I would take and use as if it were my own. When couples are wondering what comes next for them, here is a line that I want you think about: On this day you make promises to each other that are unlike any other you will make again, but there are no promises about how your life together will unfold – only that you will be with each other as it unfolds. It is the same ancient promise that Jesus shares with the ones closest in his life: There is no promise of what life will be, but a promise that it will not be lived alone.

Isn't that a big part of what we all want? We may not know what comes next, and for the most part we are okay with that, but we do want to know that whatever comes next we will not be forsaken, and that God will accompany us and walk alongside us. Joshua received that promise from the Lord right here.

When the disciples were together after Jesus had been raised from the dead but before the ascension, Jesus appears to them. In Matthew we see that he appears to them on a mountain and then disappears in his ascension. Here when Jesus appears to them before he ascends into heaven the disciples first and foremost want to know, what's next? Jesus, before you leave us here alone to do who knows what, what's next? Wouldn't that help us to be prepared for whatever it is that comes next? Is this when you will restore the kingdom of Israel.

That is a very interesting question because we know that this has been the primary goal of the disciples all along. Remember on the road to Emmaus how disappointed those disciples were when they told to a veiled Jesus in Luke 24:21, we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. He appears to them here in vs. 6 and that is again the first thing that they ask, is this now the time? Are you going to redeem Israel now? What's next, is that next, boy I hope so.

We often have a preconceived idea of what God should do next, and so we fill in the blanks for him hoping beyond hope that it will be what we want. We often have an immediate solution to dictate what comes next. But Jesus answers his disciples, and he answers us, that we are not the ones who get to decide what comes next. But while we don't get to decide, we do receive the power of God in the Holy Spirit so that as we get to that next, as we step into that path, we are not stepping into it alone.

Jesus calls his disciples, you are my witnesses. This ascension of Jesus here, that leaves them gaping into the sky, serves as the beginning of the story that we are still living out ourselves today. We are a part of this Acts story because we are the ones who have received this power and Jesus' witnesses even today.

You would think that the disciples as they received this command as they were equipped to carry out the work of God, they would have gone, like Joshua, and just get to work right away. Why are you staring into heaven. But that is not what they do. The first thing they do we find in vs.12-14, they begin by devoting themselves to prayer. If you want to be ready for what comes next, you have to read Scripture, follow the commandments, and be immersed in prayer. As a result, when Pentecost comes, right after that, they are ready.

Our call is to be in step with what comes next for God's plan in our own lives and also in the lives of the church. Today we find a message of angels that points toward the future and it is followed not by a sense of fulfillment, expressed in joy and the praise of God, like we have arrived, but by prayer in preparation for the new responsibilities. What's next can't be dictated here in the life of the church based upon any financial limitations, God can handle that.

You need to know something pretty incredible. For blanket Sunday we raised over \$14,000, for the auction you raised over 27,000 and we are pretty close to meeting our second payment for the organ just based upon your gifts and donations. Session last month made a decision to move forward on a \$300,000 capital campaign project and there was a part of me that knew that while we haven't done a capital campaign in nearly 40 years, we are asking a lot of you. The house is close to being sold for an amount that we did not anticipate, which helps with that campaign, and we were notified of an inheritance that is on its way which may be able to cover the remaining.

What comes next? When we ask that question actually wanting to know the answer, like the disciples did, we get the answer, it is not up to us to know. But this is what I will assure you, as you move forward with the next, I am by your side, I will not leave you or forsake. It will be unpredictable and it will be risky, but you will not be alone. Thanks be to God for that promise. Amen.