

## Hope in Action

Joshua 1:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6; Hebrews 3:1-13

Reverend Dr. Louise Barger

August 21, 2022

God never leaves God's people without a leader. Joshua is set apart by God to lead the Hebrews in the wilderness after the death of Moses. Moses had brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and had led them for 40 years during their wandering in the desert.

After the 40 years had passed, a new generation of people now had an identity as God's people. The time in the desert had been a time of

- shaping an attitude of hope rather than despair,
- developing a spirit of faith rather than a spirit of cynicism,
- shaping a vision of a future with promise rather than a future of mere existence.

There had been times when Moses had great hope of being the person who would lead the people into the Land of Promise.

In preparation for crossing over the Jordan into the Land of Promise, Moses had sent 12 spies, one from each tribe of the people, into the land across the Jordan. They had brought back what we would call a long-range planning report. Moses had planned for the report to be a plan for moving into the land that God had promised so long ago. But it was not to be.

The spies had brought back a report of what they thought was possible in the land across the River Jordan. There were

- 10 negative votes (The challenge of occupying the land is too great; we can't do it.)
- 2 positive votes – from Joshua and Caleb (We can occupy the land because God will help us do it.)

Joshua and Caleb were the two men with enough faith to believe that what God held out before them could be accomplished with God's help.

Remember that this people in the desert is not a nation; it is a confederation of twelve tribes, each thinking that they have a vote about following what God would have them to do. Somehow these tribes out in the desert allowed fear to grip them.

They would not allow themselves to believe that the God who had

- miraculously delivered them out of slavery in Egypt;
- allowed them to cross the Red Sea on dry ground;
- caused water to flow from the rock in the desert;
- fed them every day with manna and quail;
- kept even their shoes from wearing out

could get them across the Jordan River and settle them in the land that had been promised.

Even God cannot do with and through and for a people what they will not allow God to do. God will allow a people to live in the desert if they will not accept God's help to live any differently. God will

allow them to die in the desert if that is what they want to do. There are always consequences to our decisions, whether for good or for ill.

The message of God to the people after their decision is recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy. God said:

You were unwilling to go up (into the land); you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The Lord hates us; so the Lord brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites, those giant warriors, to destroy us."

Can't you hear the conversations back at the tribal meetings?

- "Where can we go? Our brothers (the spies that we sent out) have made us lose heart. The spies say that the people are stronger and"" taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. They even saw the Anakites, those really tall men.
- Moses pleads with the people, "Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The Lord your God, who is going before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place."

Moses put the report of the spies to a vote. Shall we proceed to the Land of Promise or not? When Moses put the question to a vote, God lost. God lost the opportunity to lead this people that God had rescued from slavery into a Land of Promise. So the Lord said to them, "Turn around and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea." One of the saddest verses in the Bible is found in Deuteronomy 2:1. It reads, "Then we turned and set out for the wilderness."

They had been camped on the western bank of the Jordan River. They could look over the river and see the Promised Land. And because of their lack of faith in God and their stubbornness, for 40 more years they lived in the desert, wandering around, until all of the generation that voted against God's plan for them died. They wandered around the desert stirring up dust and eating manna burgers instead of living in the Land of Promise,

- a land where vineyards and orchards already produced fruit;
- a land where olive groves would provide more than all of the olive oil that they could us;
- a land where trade routes crossed, and the economy was good.

We would say, "How tragic that an entire generation missed living in the Land of Promise because they didn't trust God."

Now the years have passed and it is time, once again, to try to move the people out of the desert and into the Land of Promise. Joshua is somewhere between 69 and 79 years of age and God has chosen him to lead the people into the Land. He has a new strength, a new energy born of his call from God.

Joshua instructs the people according to God's plan to get ready to cross over the Jordan River. Listen to the instructions. Consider these same instructions from God as this congregation is preparing itself to more into its future.

Joshua says to the people:

**CONSECRATE YOURSELVES.**

Prepare yourselves spiritually.

- They were to repent of their lack of faith in the past when they did not believe what God said God would do.
- They were to repent of their rebellion against God and against Moses.

To frame this in a positive way, “They were to renew their faith in the God who had brought them this far.”

They were to

HAVE A SENSE OF EXPECTATION.

The people were instructed to see signs and wonders from God. They are to look forward, not backward. (Have you ever noticed how much larger the windshield is than the rear view mirror on your car?)

Moses had found himself listening to a people complaining because they missed their leeks and melons in Egypt. Somehow the memory of how hard it was to be enslaved had faded. All the while God was trying to lead them into a land already prepared for them. God had great things that God was trying to give them.

If we are to move into the future that God has promised, and already planned for this church, we need a God-sized, God-shaped vision that will stretch our imagination and cause us to move into action even when we can't see how it can be done.

If our vision is

- small enough that we can do it in our own strength,
- we will not think that it depends upon God to succeed.
- and we will not even invite God to help us,
- and it will fail; nothing will ever change.

Joshua told the people to:

CONSECRATE YOURSELVES BEFORE GOD

HAVE A SENSE OF EXPECTATION

*and*

FOCUS YOUR SPIRITUAL EYES UPON THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets with the commandments, the rod of Aaron that budded, and a jar of manna, was the symbol of the presence of God. The Ark of the Covenant was to go before the people when they crossed the Jordan. It is the presence of God who will lead them across the Jordan. Those who lead the way with the Ark are to move into the water until the soles of their feet are in the water.

In other words, God is saying to them, and to all the generations who will follow,

“When you get to a point of a new beginning,

- don’t just stick your toe into the water to test the temperature.
- don’t feel around to find out how deep it is;
- step into the water as God has told you to do.

When you are knee-deep in the water, it’s called commitment.

I am sure that Joshua heard all kinds of excuses about how the crossing could be done better. I can imagine that the leaders gathered on the lot where they had parked their camels to discuss what they had been told to do. I can imagine the conversations might have gone like this:

Let’s think about this.

- The desert isn’t so bad.
- We’ve grown accustomed to living here.
- We like manna burgers and
- we have the recipe book for 101 ways to prepare quail.

We’ve been living in the desert for 40 years.

- What’s the rush?
- Don’t you think we could wait until the water goes back into its banks?
- There may be undercurrents.
- We don’t know where the deep spots are.
- We don’t like all of this not knowing.
- We want to be sure we can be successful before we start.
- Moses wouldn’t have done it this way.

God is a covenant God. What God says, God will do. God went before them. When the priests put their feet in the water, the waters parted so that the people could walk across on dry ground. And so they moved across the Jordan.

When we come to celebrate the centennial of our time together as a congregation, we will tell the stories of how God has helped us through the years. It is important that we never forget what God has done for us.

Joshua knew that the telling of the story to the next generations would be important. So that there would be a visible reminder, a visible memorial to remind these people of the day they crossed the Jordan, and so that they would be reminded to tell the story of the great acts of God, Joshua sent a representative from each of the twelve tribes back into the riverbed before the water returned. Each one was to pick up a stone, not a little rock, but a stone that he carried on his shoulders, and bring it to the Promised Land side of the Jordan. The stones were placed together to build a remembrance memorial, an *Ebenezer*.

There is an old Negro spiritual that says,  
“We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord  
Trusting in his Holy Word

He never fail me yet.  
Oh, Can't turn around  
We've come this far by faith.

When the story is written of the lives of the people of this congregation, may it say that we were a people of faith who were not afraid to step on new ground to follow where God led us.  
Amen.