



September 11, 2016

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Neither

Joshua 1:1, 7-9; 5:13-15

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There is a book in the Bible called Joshua, and it opens with this line: "After the death of Moses..." Not exactly a cheerful way to start a story. The Israelites have lost their leader; their leader who God used to get them out of slavery and who lead them through the wilderness for forty years. They are now standing on the edge of the Promised Land - about to enter and their leader dies. This is a crisis.

I can hear the rumors starting among the people....

*I heard we're going back to Egypt.

*I heard Joshua is not going to be our leader; someone else is.

*I think we're probably just going to be slaves of our enemies.

*I heard that Moses died when a big pillar of fire came down from heaven and swallowed him up.

*I heard that Joshua forced Moses to name him the next leader, and then just made up the story about God.

*Why can't it be like it was before?

I think you know where I am going with this. Our leader has died...and the rumors are spreading like wildfire. I am not going to focus on the individual rumors today; I want you to focus on God's word because God has something to say to us.

But I am going to say two things: One, the goal of Presbytery and the Administrative Commission that came to help us was to have all three pastors

remain and retire from here. Two, Larry's death has nothing to do with money. I just answered 3 rumors.

Now, if you have no idea what I am talking about, or not sure which rumors I just addressed, or your rumor was not addressed, I again invite you to The Grapevine – the open forum on Wednesday, Sept 21 at 10 a.m. Bring your rumors and we will address them. Bring your questions. Plus we will share with you our next steps as we slowly move forward.

Now put that aside and let us hear what God will say to us this day as I read our scripture passage. Before I do, let's pray

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Read Joshua 1: 1, 7-9

Our leader has died. What do we do next? Many of you have asked me that question? What do we do now?

I think these words I just read in our scripture passage are a good way to begin. Verse 8 "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

This is our next step. To read scripture. Talk about it. Meditate on it. Listen to what God has to say to us. Then put it into practice. It is a good way to move forward.

Over the last 2 weeks, I have been reading and meditating on the Psalms because they say exactly how I feel. I am going to show you how I have been meditating on the Psalms so you can do it as well.

Last Friday, I read Psalm 77.

I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.

Sometimes it is hard to verbalize the anger in your heart, the hurt, the dismay. So you can turn to the Psalms and have someone else verbalize what is in here (touch my heart). To be honest in crying out to God.

Then this Psalm began a series of questions that I dared not present to God, but they were in my head. The Psalmist expressed my fears:

Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Sometimes it is good to allow scripture to say what you feel and fear, and to know that godly people so long ago thought the same way. And they presented those fears to God so we could use them today.

The Psalm continues after all these questions:

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds."

I stopped reading here, and did what the Psalmist did, who went back in time and remembered all the ways God helped the Israelites. I began to think about all the miracles and ways God has worked here in the past, especially last year as the presence of God was felt so strong in this sanctuary; that people were coming up

to us pastors at the doors with tears in their eyes because they knew they were in the presence of God and God spoke to them. And I remembered last Easter. So many people came that we ran out of places to sit, and we had to raid the classrooms for chairs. And we soaked in the glory of the Resurrection that day.

This is what happens when you do that, when you go back and remember all that God has done: your fears turn to praise. The Psalm continues:

Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.

So I prayed that God would raise us up from the ashes; that God would work a miracle, so that we, and our neighbors, will know the glory of God and his abiding presence in our sanctuary. For we do serve a resurrected savior who can resurrect us.

Meditate on scripture and allow it to move into your heart and soul and mind. This is our next step. To take time to read God's word. To listen. To study and meditate on it. And then put it into practice. We do it here on Sunday mornings. Do it at home. Join one of our Bible Studies. This is our next step: "Keep this book of the Law always on your lips."

We do this because God says I am with you. I will never leave you. So don't be afraid. Be strong. Be courageous. These are words in the midst of grief.

And what is so wonderful that this is not the only place in scripture where this assurance is found. Again and again we read that God cares for the grieving, meets us with His love, comforts us with his word and grants us the assurance of God's strengthening presence.

"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." "

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."

"The Lord is my refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble."

“I am the vine. You are the branches. Remain in me and I will remain in you.”
Even at his own passing, Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

This is where we rest today, isn't it? It is in this fact that the Good Shepherd is here with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. God's rod and staff comfort us and our cup of joy will once again, one day, overflow.

This is God's word for us today: to continue reading God's word, listening, put into practice and know of God's presence with us. This is our next step.

All of this is reinforced in our next scripture passage with a little addition. Follow along as I read:

Joshua 5:13-15

I am intrigued by this passage. Joshua asks this person: are you for us or for our enemies? The man says “Neither.” I would have said to this man, “What kind of answer is that? Didn't you hear me? Are you for us or against us?” Then the man, of course, reveals who he is: the commander of the army of the Lord.

I am still intrigued that God did not answer the question. By not directly answering the question, God is saying what is important: not what side God is on, but that the presence of God has come to them, and therefore they are standing on holy ground. You don't need to know the answer to the question; all you need to know is that I am here with you.

We think like Joshua, don't we? God, are you for us or for those who left us? Neither. I am here with you; that is all you need to know. And what did Joshua do? He fell to his face in reverence and worshipped. This, too, is our next step. We continue to worship the God who is here.

In the midst of the worship, Joshua then asked, "What message do you have for me, your servant?" There it is again – listening to what God has to say.

Maybe the next time someone asks you what is the church going to do next, you can say, “Well, we are worshipping God, because God is here with us. And while we worship on holy ground, we listen to what God has to say to us.”

So what are our next steps? We continue worshipping God because God is here. We listen to what God has to say to us. We put it into practice. And in time, we will be taken a step further.

I share again with you a prayer that I say everyday in my car on my way here in the mornings. I usually use the word “I” because I am praying for myself, but in the past two weeks I have been saying “we” because I am praying it for all of us: “Heavenly Father, I pray this day that we may live in your presence and please you more and more.” This is our next step – to live in the presence of God.

The prayer goes on:

“Lord Jesus Christ, I pray this day we may take up our cross and follow you.” This one is hard to say, because we have taken up our cross (actually, it was thrust upon us). We have a cross to bear. But remember the next part: may we follow You. We get up under the weight of that cross and follow Christ.

Let me give you a non-church example: I am a football fan, specifically the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikings approached this year with great anticipation. They have built a good team around an up and coming young quarterback. They have an awesome new stadium. The Super Bowl gleamed in their eyes.

About a week ago, the Vikings young quarterback, Teddy Bridgewater, suffered a season ending injury to his knee. The Vikings were devastated, they saw their hopes for the year dashed, but Teddy Bridgewater made this statement to the press:

In order to have a testimony, you have to have a test. I come from amazing DNA, I watched my mom fight and win against breast cancer. We will, as a team, attack my rehab with the same vigor and energy. My faith is strong, my faith is unwavering and my vision is clear. My purpose will not be denied.

May we as a church have such a testimony as we bear our cross.

My morning prayer goes on:

So far, it has been “Heavenly Father, I pray this day we may live in your presence and please you more and more. Lord Jesus Christ, I pray this day, we may take up our cross and follow you.”

Here is the third part:

“Holy Spirit, I pray this day you will fill us with all your fullness and your fruit will ripen within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.” We need all of those qualities to ripen within us. They ripen within us when we remain in our Lord. When we worship. When we listen and hear God’s word. When we put it into practice.

The prayer ends:

Holy, Blessed, glorious Trinity, three persons in one have mercy on us....

And I add:

Remember us
Save us
Resurrect us
Make us a thin place
Amen