Sermon - *Letting Go Of The Manna*

Scripture Lesson: Numbers 27:15-23

The book of Numbers

documents the leadership transition

from Moses to Joshua.

Hear now the word of the Lord

from Numbers 27.

> Moses said to the Lord,
>
> "May the Lord,
>
> the God who gives breath to every living thing,
>
> appoint someone over this community
>
> to go out
>
> and to come in
>
>
> One who will lead them out
>
> and bring them back in,
>
> so the Lord's people
>
> will not be like sheep
>
> without a shepherd."

So the Lord said to Moses,

“Take Joshua son of Nun,

a man in whom is the spirit of leadership,

and lay your hands on him.

Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly

and commission him

in their presence.

Give him some of your authority

so that the whole Israelite community

will obey him.

He is to stand before Eleazar the priest,

who will obtain decisions for him

by inquiring of the Urim

before the Lord.

At his command

he and the entire community of the Israelites

will go out,

and at his command

they will come in."

Moses did as the Lord commanded him.

He took Joshua

and had him stand before Eleazar the priest

and before the whole assembly.

Then he laid his hands on him

and commissioned him,

as the Lord instructed

through Moses.

The word of the Lord! (Thanks be to God.)

Sermon

Friends, it is a holy and beautiful thing

to stand on the precipice

of a new beginning.

Today, we are gathered

by the authority of Presbytery de Cristo

to celebrate a new covenant

—to our lay hands on the servant of God

and to install him

into the pastoral leadership

of this congregation.

It is a day of crisp robes,

bright smiles,

and beautiful hymns.

Today is a day of profound hope.

But if we are to be completely honest, beneath the starch of the collars

and the festive air of the sanctuary,

days like today

come with a quiet, vibrating undercurrent of anxiety.

Because every new beginning

requires an ending.

Every step into the future

means leaving the safety of the shore.

Forty years.

Four entire decades of the exact same footprint in the dirt.

For forty years,

the people of Israel knew exactly one leader. His name was Moses. He was the giant who climbed the burning mountain and came down with the tablets of the law.

He was the one who stared down Pharaoh.

When the people were parched,

Moses struck the rock and water gushed out.

When they were lost,

Moses pointed to the pillar of cloud.

In fact

An entire generation had been born, raised, and grown gray in the wilderness, and they had never known another face at the front of their camp.

Moses *was* the definition of leadership.

And then,

As the dust settles on the plains of Moab,

the word came down:

Moses is stepping back.

Moses will not be crossing the river. Instead, somebody named Joshua

is being called to step out

from the long, towering shadow

of a forty-year legacy

and to take his staff.

Can you blame the people

if their knees began to shake?

Can you blame them

if, when the campfire embers burned low, the whispers started through the tents?

You can hear it now.

"Sure, Joshua was a good assistant. But can he preach like Moses? Does he have the presence? Moses had a way of handling things. This new guy... he's really different."

Because God, in His infinite and sometimes frustrating wisdom, didn't time this pastoral transition for the calm, dry season.

When Israel finally arrived at the banks of the Jordan River,

the silence of the desert was shattered

by a low, terrifying roar.

It is the harvest season. And during the harvest, the Jordan isn't a peaceful stream—it rages.

It is a churning, brown, high-velocity torrent

of flood-stage water,

tearing down trees

and overflowing its banks.

Imagine

the emergency committee meetings

in the tents that night.

The elders are looking out

at the rushing, wall of muddy water,

looking back at this new guy, Joshua,

and asking the questions

that every church asks

when the landscape changes:

"Is this even safe?

Does he know what he's doing?

Moses would have known how to handle this.

If Moses were here, that water would have been parted already.

Why are we just standing here watching the flood?"

And it wasn't just the river making their stomachs churn; it was the **menu**.

For forty years, the wilderness had been utterly predictable.

Every single morning, like clockwork, they walked outside, and there it was: manna.

It may have been bland.

It was certainly repetitive.

They'd been complaining about it for 40 years.

But it was *safe*.

It was guaranteed.

But crossing the Jordan meant the manna was going to stop.

Crossing into the Promised Land

meant that they were going to have to adapt,

learn to plant,

to feed themselves in a new world.

And all of sudden,

the boring, predictability of the wilderness

looked like fine dining compared to the terrifying unknown of the future.

Those ancient pilgrims

were already mourning the loss of the comfortable,

even though the comfortable

had kept them stuck in the wilderness

for forty years.

~

And what about Joshua?

We like to paint our biblical heroes

in flawless stained glass,

but Joshua was just terrified.

How do we know that?

Because three distinct times in the span of a single conversation, God has to explicitly instruct Joshua:

"Be strong and courageous…

do not be frightened or dismayed."

God doesn't waste breath

telling people to be brave

unless their hands are already shaking.

Joshua was facing four things:

1. a forty-year shadow,
2. a flood-stage river,
3. a grumbling congregation,
4. and his own personal sense of inadequacy.

So, what is God's strategy

to cure the people's cynicism

and calm Joshua's nerves?

It certainly was not a secret corporate transition.

It wasn't a private handoff behind closed doors in a tent.

God tells Moses: *“Take Joshua… and lay your hands on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, and commission him in their sight.”*

God staged a public installation service right on the edge of that roaring, muddy river.

Moses publicly

laid his heavy, weathered hands on Joshua, transferring a portion of his authority.

This was not so Joshua

could become a carbon copy of Moses,

but rather so the whole congregation

could see with their own eyes

that the same God

who ordered their past

is already organizing their future.

I think that as Presbyterians,

you and I understand this deeply.

We don't believe a pastor is a lone-wolf CEO hired to single-handedly save the company.

Rather we believe deeply

in the priesthood of all believers.

We believe in an ordered ministry

where teaching elders

and ruling elders lead together,

locking arms.

This installation today is your public laying on of hands.

It is the visible, tangible proof

that God provides

for the flood stages of life

by binding a leader

and a people together

in a sacred, unbreakable covenant.

Joshua didn't need to be Moses.

He just had to be Joshua.

And this congregation doesn't have to live in the Jordanian desert;

you just have to trust the office

and the call.

But hear this, church:

You cannot cross the Jordan

if you are still clinging to the manna.

Today is the day you must lay down the expectations of the past.

Stop grading your new pastor

against the shadow of what used to be.

Let go of the "manna"—the old, comfortable habits, the programs, and the ways of doing things that kept you safe in the past,

but will doom you

to wandering in the wilderness

as time goes on.

And to my brother Blair: It is okay to be nervous. Joshua was nervous. The shadow of ministry is long, and the rivers of our modern culture run fast, deep, and turbulent. But the same God who was with Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox and Jonathan Edwards is the God who called you by name to this specific place, for this exact moment.

Trust the hands that are laid on you today.

Also remember how this story ends.

When the time came to cross,

God told the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant to lead the way.

Picture the scene. The wooden poles of the Ark are heavy on their shoulders. They march down the muddy bank. The water is rushing past at deadly speed. If a foot slips, they drown.

And then the text takes note of something incredible:

The waters of the Jordan did not part

    while they were standing safely on the shore.

The miracle

    Did not happen

while they were waiting for a guarantee.

The text says

that the waters parted

the exact moment

the soles of the priests' feet

touched the edge of that rushing water.

They had to hover a foot over the roaring flood,

step down into the wet mud,

and take that risk

before the water ever parted.

And if we let our anxiety win today

—if we demand the safety of the desert

and if we refuse to follow a leader into a raging river

—we will die on the wrong side of the Jordan.

We will become a beautiful museum of what God *used* to do.

But if we embrace this public covenant

—if you, the congregation,

commit to wetting your feet

alongside your pastor,

and if you, Blair,

commit to leading with courage

—I promise you

that the water will move.

The miracle happens

when we take that risk together.

When a pastor and a congregation

step out in mutual trust,

the raging waters of anxiety,

of doubt,

and of fear

dry up

before the presence of the Living God.

The river doesn't part for us

while we're standing on dry ground.

God doesn't call us to safe seasons;

He calls us to flood-stage futures.

So sisters and brothers

let us roll up our sleeves,

let us link our arms together,

let us step out into that river,

and let us cross over

into that land that God has promised.

Amen!