

August 18, 2024
Acts 1:6-11, Joshua 1:1-9
“Whenever I feel afraid . . .”
Barbara Chalfant

Acts 1: 6-11

The Ascension of Jesus

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’⁷ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Joshua 1: 1-9

God’s Commission to Joshua

1 After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying,² ‘My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.’³ Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses.⁴ From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory.⁵ No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.⁶ Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go.⁸ This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.⁹ I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.’



I hate to admit it... but I am overly attached to my phone... not so much for the Camera or the phone or the quite handy flashlight... or even for the easy shopping... What I love is the GPS. I love that it tells me where to turn to get to where I want to go. I love that it adjusts to my mistakes, and I am so grateful that it lets me know what the speed limit is supposed to be wherever I am. It even tells me when there are hazards ahead. What a gift! However, when I lived in West Virginia and drove all over the state on behalf of the Presbytery of West Virginia I always had to carry a paper map in the car for when the GPS would lose connection and leave me stranded in the middle of some holler tucked up in the mountains.

The first time it happened I was up early Sunday morning driving to join a tiny church for worship and to do their sermon. I had planned two hours for the drive and was about 30 minutes away from the church when the GPS disconnected. At first, I was not concerned. I was on a fairly nice two-lane road going down into a valley. No problem! I would just follow the road, surely there would be signs

ahead that could help. Within 10 minutes the road dead ended in another, less traveled two-lane road. There were signs, but none of them mentioned the little town I was going to. So, I took a deep breath, tried to remember what I had seen on the map and turned right. Soon I was driving the curves of the edge of the mountain up and then down into another valley... still no signs... And then another intersection ... I prayed for wisdom... for guidance... for my GPS to start working! And turned right again. About 5 miles later I heard the wonderful sound of the lady on my phone... in 1.5 miles turn left on Anderson Road. Praise be! Someone knew where I was! I made it to the church with 10 minutes to spare!

It is a bit frightening not to have guidance or leadership when you need it!

The people of Israel were used to having Moses as their GPS... They were used to hearing and following the sound of his voice. For more than 40 years he had been their leader, He had gotten them out of Egypt, out of slavery, and through the wilderness. The old generation was gone, and a new generation was here... all they had ever known was the leadership of Moses. Now a new voice was taking the reins. Joshua was now in charge.



Needless to say, Joshua needed a bit of encouragement as did the people. So, God spoke to Joshua explaining the plan moving forward. God assured Joshua saying:

⁵No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. ⁶Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. ⁷Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you...

The message is clear... God is still with them; God will fulfill the promises made to Moses through the actions of Joshua. Joshua is asked to “Be strong and courageous” and to follow the law. God repeats “Be strong and courageous” again and a third time saying:

⁹I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.’

God is quite clear. In this time of transition, in this time of risk, in this time of battles and breaking down walls, in this time of massive change God has one message. Do not be frightened, I am with you, be strong and courageous.

I love that...

God has expectations of Joshua and the people of Israel... There was more work to do... A change in leadership did not stop the story from moving forward.



It was the same with the disciples too. When Jesus was taken away, up into the clouds they were stunned into frozen silence. For three years they had been following the “Son of Man” all over the country. Some days large crowds joined them, some days were quieter, some days they encountered authorities who were not happy about anything Jesus said and did, and other days there were signs, wonders and miracles. Every day they learned something new, pondered over the confusing details of the things Jesus said and did and they learned well. But this day, the day of the ascension, they still had questions, still had so much to

learn, still needed their teacher Jesus and with little warning he was lifted up into heaven. So, there they stood, staring at the clouds where Jesus had vanished.

I wonder what they were thinking. Now what? Is he coming back? How long should we stand here waiting? What do we do now? Who is our leader? Is it over or is there more? How can we manage without him? Just breathe!

They must have stood there for a while, because God sent two angels to get them moving again... They said:

‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

In other words, don't just stand there! You know what he said and all that he taught you. He will be back, but until then, get a move on and do what you have been told to do!

The angels were right... There was news to be shared with the friends and followers of Jesus, there were people to see and things to do. They needed to wait for the promised advocate, the Holy Spirit, to guide and walk with them. They knew what to do. They just need a little push. Just the fact that we are here today, worshipping God together and remembering the story of Jesus says that they did a great job.



Just a couple of weeks ago you found out that your leader, your pastor, was moving away. You have been walking with him and him with you for nine years. That is quite a while. He has been your GPS as you sought to follow Christ and to walk as close to God in this time and place as possible. You have grown used to the sound of his voice, the way he leads, the way he listens, the way he loves and cares for you. It will seem very odd and out of sorts when he is gone. I know... you wish he could stay. But it is his time to move on and your time to move forward. Do not stand too long looking up into the clouds like the disciples... you have work to do, good news to tell, ministry to manage and so much more. Hear again and again the words of God to Joshua and make them yours... Don't be afraid, be strong and courageous!

In the months to come you will have a variety of people from the presbytery walking with you, visitors to your pulpit on Sundays, people working with your session to help you seek an interim pastor, people who walk with you and your interim pastor through a mission study, people who will help you form a Pastor Nominating Committee and do the work of

seeking out a permanent pastor for this congregation. It will take a while, two maybe even three years of deeply Christ centered, thoughtful, prayerful service on your part. It will be an adventure, if you let it ... if you are unafraid, if you are strong and courageous, if you listen well and continue to hold on to each other well, you will experience the movement of the Holy Spirit in new and life changing, life giving ways.

Children of God, beloved congregation of Trinity Presbyterian Church, do not stare into the clouds hoping for the past to return, follow Christ, move in and with the Holy Spirit and do not be afraid. Be strong and courageous for you are not alone.

Amen