



Sunday, Oct. 18, 2020

Sermon Series: Strength for Today, and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Faith to Go Out with Good Courage

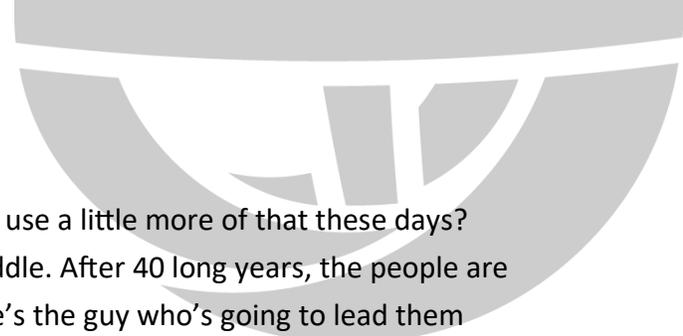
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Joshua 1:1-9 NRSV

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. ³Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. ⁴From 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. 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; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸This 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. 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."

There are a lot of great sports movies out there. *Hoosiers. Remember the Titans. Miracle. The Bad News Bears. The Blind Side.* And whether it's football or basketball or hockey or baseball, there's almost always a scene where the team has stopped believing in themselves. They're down on the scoreboard and the clock is ticking. They've blown a key play or two and their mistakes have cost them. Shoulders slump; heads hang low. And then the coach or the captain gathers the team, looks them in the eye, and says something like, "We've got to dig deep. We'll miss 100% of the shots we don't take. We're only losers if we quit trying. This is our moment. Go out there and show them that we came to win." The soundtrack swells and the team yells ... and, well, it wouldn't be a great sports movie if it didn't have a happy ending, would it?

Sure, credit for the win goes to the athletes. But let's not discount the role of the pep talk. Whether it's a pregame huddle or motivational speaker or a sermon: Words are powerful. They matter. They



can build confidence and inspire action. And who couldn't use a little more of that these days? God's words to Joshua would fit right in a locker room huddle. After 40 long years, the people are finally on the cusp of reaching the promised land ... and he's the guy who's going to lead them across the finish line. Except, he's more like the 3rd string quarterback than the captain of the team. It was Moses who'd gotten them this far. Moses stood up to Pharaoh, Moses brought them through the wilderness, Moses negotiated and communicated directly with the Lord. This was to be Moses' moment ... except Moses' mistakes had cost him, and he'd died before seeing his dream fulfilled. Not only was Joshua an untested leader, this land God had promised them wasn't exactly empty. There were people living there – lots of them, with cities and armies and no plans to vacate the premises for a bunch of nomads.

But God gives Joshua the boost he needs: Be strong and courageous. Be strong and very courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged. I will be with you wherever you go.

So what words are giving you a boost these days?

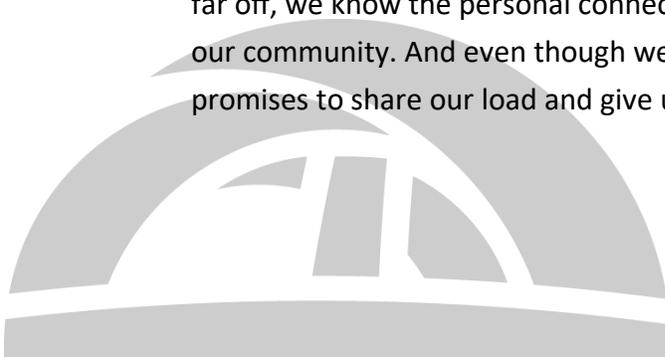
There's certainly a lot to tune out – negative ads and campaign rhetoric and a tsunami of alarming news about the environment and the economy and our country's public health. But where are you finding words that make remind you to be strong and brave? This fall at Zumbro we're leaning into words found in the prayer of good courage, part of Matins and Vespers in the old green hymnal: *Lord, you have called your servants into ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we are going, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

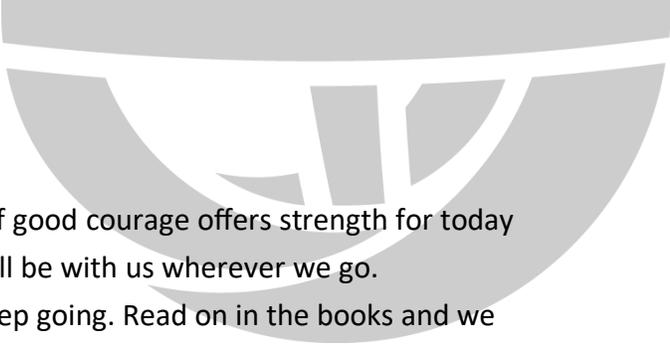
I like this prayer. It's not flashy or motivational. It's quiet. Realistic. Humble. Hopeful. It places the future squarely in God's hands. We don't know where we are going, it says, but we trust that you are taking us there. We don't know what we will need, but we believe that you will help us. This prayer doesn't ask for a victory or a blessing or success. Just the faith to be brave.

Is that enough?

In these times, I think so. I think it's more than enough, actually. See, leaders are often celebrated for their vision, their wisdom, and their strategy. But ultimately what they need is the good courage to keep going.

As a church, that's what we're praying for today. Like so many of you, we're still making a lot of plans in pencil. As we look to the future we're trying to budget carefully, while recognizing that it is your generosity that makes our ministry possible. In a time when in-person gatherings still feel so far off, we know the personal connections we can make are exponentially important for sustaining our community. And even though we're all tired – as leaders and as a country – we trust in Jesus' promises to share our load and give us rest.





That doesn't make for much of a pep talk. But the prayer of good courage offers strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow by reminding us that God will be with us wherever we go.

Those are the words that gave Joshua the confidence to keep going. Read on in the books and we learn that he sent spies to scout out the land. Then he gave the people careful instructions. And he listened to God's command to follow the Ark of the Covenant – the physical house of God for those people – when they were ready to cross the Jordan River.

Now, the thing to note is that most of the year, the Jordan is about 100 feet wide and 3-10 feet deep. But Scripture says this story takes place at the time of the harvest. The river is at flood stage – maybe six times as wide and ten times as deep. And because it drops almost 10000 feet in elevation from its headwaters at Mt Hermon to its end at the Dead Sea, it moves fast. Scary fast. There were no bridges or pontoon boats to get the people across. The only thing they had was a command from God that the priests should carry the Ark into the River a few steps and then stop. I'm sure there were a few slumped shoulders and hanging heads.

Here's the thing: Scripture says that once the priests show up with the ark the waters stop flowing. But they don't stop right there. The waters pile up upstream at another town more than a dozen miles away. Which means there's a whole lot of water that still needs to come rushing by before the muddy river bottom is in sight. The team is waiting, looking at their leader. Now is his time to be strong and courageous. I imagine Joshua taking a deep breath and setting foot into the water. He's up to his ankles, his knees, his hips. The water is still fast and cold. But he keeps pushing across. He's up to his waist, his ribs, his armpits. Just as Joshua's about to get in over his head, the water begins to recede. It slowly drains away until the Israelites can safely cross over into Canaan.

Friends, our promised land isn't waiting at the end of COVID or after the election season is over. I'm not quite sure where the floodwaters are for you these days. But this river's not going to be spilling over forever. The world needs you to be strong and courageous now. The world needs the church to be strong and courageous now.

The good news: You are already doing things that take courage. Every day brings new opportunities to put on Christ. To embody love and acceptance. To refrain from snark and judgment. To pray for not only your friends but for the people who make your skin crawl and your anger flare hot.

And we are doing things that take courage. Every week we affirm Zumbro's mission statement – that God calls us to build bridges of understanding and peace, and reach out with compassion, and share the hope of Jesus.

These things matter. They are a pep talk for a world that desperately needs to hear and see that faith in Christ can carry us through.

So people of God, do not give up. Be strong. Be brave. Be filled with confidence that God is with you – God is with us – God is with us all, wherever we go. Amen.

