

Be Strong!

Joshua 1:1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Rev. Darin K. Travis**

Read Scripture - The secret things belong to the Lord our God.....but what has been revealed belongs to us and our children that we might do all the words of this law.

In our passage today, we are beginning our study of the book of Joshua. It is historical narrative telling of Israel's journey to occupy, distribute, and inhabit the land of promise. It opens with a massive time of transition for Joshua, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan...I am giving you the land." There are the big moments in life that you believe you're ready for: you face them with great anticipation and eager exuberance. I asked our elders this week, "What big transitions were you ready for?" One of our statesmen told of being well groomed by his mentor and then sitting for the first time in the CEO chair. Another told of taking command of a classroom as a brand-new teacher. I thought about the birth of my first-born and how it felt bringing her home from the hospital. In all these things: the waiting, the preparation, and the dreams of what it will finally be like when that which is anticipated is finally here, it can be so exhilarating. From the mahogany-paneled boardroom, to the classroom with eager 1st graders beaming back at you, to a new family emerging from a sterile hospital into the shining light day, the possibility and excitement of opportunity is palpable.

But then there is the moment when the weight of leadership comes crashing down and the fear over circumstances and personal shortcomings can seem overwhelming. When I strapped my daughter into the car seat for the first time, I distinctly remember thinking, "What is this hospital staff doing letting *ME* take this baby away from here? Am I ready for this?" Certainly, that evening when I tried to change a diaper for the first time, I was well aware that I was over my head. I mean, no one told me about meconium - newborns having sticky black tar? I thought, "Oh man, something is drastically wrong here!"

As for Joshua, he is faced with the weight of leading a million people beyond the imposing river Jordan at flood stage. Joshua, as well as us today, need to know that we can trust God during change. Even during the soul-searching upheaval that comes from being tasked to carry out overwhelming God-sized tasks, God knows the good works that He has already set up for us to do; we need to trust his promises with faith and fidelity as we walk in them.

We are going to look at three points to see how we must trust God when times of change threaten to overwhelm us: 1.) We must be strong: trusting God to bring his promises to pass. 2.) We must trust God's word: not turning to the right or left; knowing that fidelity and obedience matter. 3.) We must have courage: knowing that God is with us and therefore we can trust His Spirit to fill us.

First, let us consider how we must be strong, trusting God to bring his promises to pass. Recall the story of Joshua and how he got to the precipice of the promised land. The big picture of Joshua's life goes all the way back to Genesis chapters twelve and seventeen. God told Joshua's forefather, Abram, "Go from your country to the land that I will show you..., I will make you a great nation, I will bless you

and make your name great, so that all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." God, of whom Psalm 24 says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" has sovereignly chosen to bless one man and his lineage, graciously giving him a particular land, so that all the nations might be blessed. Abram grows into the nation of Israel, to whom God says, "I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of our sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." Israel has been promised the land of Canaan as a gift that they might be a blessing.

Up until this moment on the banks of the Jordan, this nation of Abraham's seed has been led by Moses. Moses has been the towering consummate leader of Israel that dramatically delivered them out of Egypt. After escaping Pharaoh's oppression in Egypt, Israel is almost instantly confronted by the Amalekites. This is where we see Joshua, who was previously unknown, take the scene in Exodus 17. Moses tasks him to assemble an army to defeat King Amalek. As the battle rages, whenever Moses' arms are raised toward heaven, Joshua gains Israel the advantage in the battle. If Moses' arms are down, Israel begins to lose. Thankfully, as Moses' arms get propped up by Aaron and Hur, God fights Israel's battle. This allows Joshua to overwhelm King Amalek and be heralded as a military leader. (Ex 17:8-13)

This dramatic military conquest begins Joshua's apprenticeship under Moses. When Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to receive the ten commandments, it is Joshua that goes up to assist. When they come off the mountain and see Israel below worshipping a golden calf, Moses erects a tent of meeting to speak face-to-face with God. While in that tent, Joshua stands by waiting. I can only imagine what it must have been like to stand next to that tent when the light of God's glory filled the place. I wonder, did blinding light pierce through the holes and openings in the tent? Joshua didn't have to imagine; he was there. When ten spies doubted that God would give them the land, Joshua and Caleb gave a report of faith saying, "Let us go at once and occupy the land...if the Lord delights in us, he will [surely] bring us into the land." (Num 13:30-14:10) In all these ways, Joshua had an intimate knowledge of God's power. Now today's text picks up four decades later with Joshua standing on the banks of the Jordan. We hear God say, "Be strong Joshua... Arise, I am giving this land to you."

God's promises will not fail. Though Israel had to go through captivity in Egypt, though they had to wander in the dessert for forty years, the time has come. Today is the day. Joshua is told to trust God's promises, and we are too. God's plans will come to pass, and we have the opportunity to experience him fulfill them. We have battles raging around us. What promises are you clinging to as you trust God this morning to fight on your behalf? Is God leading you to do something about the poor in our community? Has he been prompting you to volunteer an hour a week to read to a child in an underserved school? Is he leading you to do something about the crime in Baton Rouge, even if it's just lifting up in prayer the arms of those who patrol our streets? With the leaking of the supreme court's draft possibly overturning Roe, have you had conversations with loved ones about God's desire for life? I have. This week, when someone I dearly love in my family said, "I don't think it's right for the government to force a woman to carry a baby." I had to trust God's promises. I didn't need to attack her; she's been deceived by our culture that thinks we are to have autonomy at any cost. Instead, I calmly asked her to think through her position, for I know that the real

battle is against the forces of evil that are at work in the heavenly realms. I can trust in the promises of God that say he is the giver of life. I can trust God who said to both David and Jeremiah that even when they were in the womb, God knew them. The text doesn't say God saw their embryonic tissue. It says with personal pronouns that God knew both of them. (Jer 1:5; Psalm 139:13) Gerrit told us just a few weeks back that Christians would be gas-lighted over the issue of abortion, that the culture would get louder and louder in saying that we are against women. Oh, how quickly the battle can intensify. Know that we can trust God during upheaval. He fights the battle, and His promises will come to pass.

The second point I want us to consider during these times of change is that we must trust God's word: not turning to the right or left; knowing that fidelity and obedience matter.

With this amazing experience of apprenticing under Moses and experiencing God's mighty hand to deliver, Joshua has been well groomed to take command of Israel. The starting pistol to the race that Israel has been warming up for a few hundred years is about to sound. The time is now for the real race to begin and God's words "Arise Joshua, go!" must be ringing in Joshua's ears. Yet with all this excitement, why does God have to tell him not once, but three different times: be strong and courageous? Is it because the same people are still inhabiting the land that were described as giants that devour people? Is it because their cities are even more fortified than when Joshua first scouted their land? Those things may be true, but Joshua is a seasoned military leader. He has watched God route the Amalekites simply by Moses' arms being lifted to heaven.

I'm sure the formidable enemies in the promised land were part of what Joshua needed God's encouragement for, but there is more. Listen to these words in Joshua 1:7, "Only be strong and courageous, being careful to do according to all the Law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left." Joshua knows of God's judgment. Forty years ago, Joshua gave a report of faith to Moses that God was giving them the promised land, but the other spies doubted and rebelled against God. (Num 14:6-9) In turn, God punished Israel by making them wander in the wilderness until the entire generation that rebelled against God had died. The text doesn't say specifically how old Joshua was when he spied out the land. As a proven military leader, I would guess he was at least in his twenties. When I was in my twenties, I feared really big things. Like my fear that I wouldn't have the money I needed for important things such as the new mountain bike I had been daydreaming about. I feared my pursuit of a cute little girl from Louisiana might not go the way I hoped. Thankfully for this Indiana boy, I won her over and now our family of seven worships in this wonderful place Sunday after Sunday. Those were genuine fears, but for forty years he had to watch every adult he knew pass away because of God's judgment. Though God had given promises that are sure to come to pass, our obedience matters. He tells Joshua not to turn to the right or to the left from doing God's Law.

Just like Joshua, we need to heed God's exhortation to meditate on God's Law. Fidelity and obedience matter and we desperately need to meditate on God's Law. We must do so day and night that we might be careful to according to all that is written in it.

As a church, do we know well all that is written in the Bible? Our confirmation kids just wrapped up their confirmation studies. They can recite the ten commandments in order, can you? How many of the covenants can you name? How many of the seven "I am" statements in the book of John can you recite? Can you fill in the "blessed are the..." statements from Jesus' sermon on the mount?

The Psalmist says, "As the deer pants for the water, so does my soul long for thee. O God." (Ps 42:1) I am embarrassed to say how easily at the end of the day when I want to unwind and relax, my impulse can be to want to watch something on television rather than spend more time in God's word or prayer. Like junk food, I know candy doesn't really satisfy. Yet if I'm not careful, I can fill my hunger with chips and chocolate, rather than the life-giving healthy food of God's Word that truly fills. Praise God that his spirit gently convicts and leads us back to rest and delight in his Word. Do not turn from the right or to the left. Trust God and His Word; fidelity and obedience matter.

The third point for this morning comes from verses five and nine. God says to Joshua, "Have courage... Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you...for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Dear church, these are the words we need to hear. **Have courage: God is with you, wherever you go; you can trust His Spirit to fill you.**

Do you remember when you were young and felt like you could take on the world? We are filled with exuberance when we naively think of only the glories of a successful enterprise. I was twenty-six when I became the youngest director in the Great Lakes region of the campus ministry Cru when I moved to Detroit. I was sure God was leading me to win all the students on the campuses in the metro area to Christ in no time. I loaded up my car and moved into the city with great anticipation of all the Lord would do. Little did I know that the night the previous director moved his carload full of all his worldly possessions to the same neighborhood, his car was stolen with everything he owned inside. My time in Detroit will be filled with amazing mountain top experiences and incredibly low ones as well, but I had no idea to what degree when I was twenty-six.

We're filled with exuberance when we ponder success, but we're filled with fear when we consider the realities of all that potentially could, already has, or probably will go wrong. We are such a mixture of surface level confidence and deeper level fear. This causes us to hear exhortations like "Be strong and courageous" as clarion battle cries, and at the very same time, heavy blankets of burden and expectation. We have heard God's promises and somewhat expect his blessing. I know God is for me: he saved my soul, He provides for me like the lilies in the field and will one day carry me into glory. And yet on a deeper level, we can flounder in expecting God's blessing. When children quibble and fight, do we really trust that God will prevail in causing them to love Him and each other deeply? Do we have the confidence to ask God to bless our

marriages with intimacy and passion even in the midst of doubt, cold-shoulders, and settling into a state of simply co-habiting. Do we have the confidence and fortitude not to covet after more money and security?

There is an external nature of the command "Be strong and courageous" - this is what I've done for you, this is what you've seen before: so you SHOULD be strong and courageous. In contrast, I want to encourage you that there is an internal nature to the command. God says, "I am with you wherever you go." He wants to fill you on the inside to trust his promises in your life. His command is not an external rod chastening you for not being strong enough and beating you to strive harder to have courage. Because Jesus has already paid for our iniquity by taking our sins upon him on the cross, and because He sends His Spirit generously to all who call on His name, we can know that "be strong and courageous" are meant to be words of great relief and comfort. Be strong and courageous dear one, Jesus has already won the battle for everything that you are striving for! Jesus knows the deepest fears of your heart, he knows the most debilitating insecurities that you hope no one will ever know. Even with all our personal shortcomings and sin, for all who are in Christ, Jesus says, "I will never leave you, I will never forsake you."

In Deut 31, before Joshua went into battle, it says that hands were laid upon him and he was commissioned to lead Israel. Most importantly, the text says that the spirit of the Lord was upon him. As believers, we have the indwelling of the Spirit to continue to whisper to our soul: Be strong, do not turn from my Law, and have courage - I will fill you with my Spirit wherever you are.

As we close, Joshua was on the precipice of leading all of Israel into a land flowing with milk and honey, prepared for them as a gift from their heavenly father. You might not be taking the helm as the CEO of a company tomorrow when start your day, but you do have victories and good works that God has prepared beforehand that you may personally take responsibility to walk in them. May you be strong and courageous in all that He has called you to do!

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