

Sermon

“Wherever We Go”

February 2nd, 2020 ~ First Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Based on Isaiah 43:16-21 and Joshua 1:1-9

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. [NRSV]

Joshua 1:1-9

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.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: God of steadfast love, by the guidance of your Spirit instruct and teach us in the way we should go, wherever that may be; through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray; and let all God's people say ... Amen.

September 23rd, 2018

I preached my first sermon here at First Presbyterian Church back on September 23rd, 2018, and during that first sermon to you that day I talked about how this family of faith was entering a new season in its life and ministry. And, I took time to emphasize that word—*season*. Because it wasn't just that something ended and something else began, as if one proverbial door closed and another opened. And, it wasn't a situation where God was present one moment and then gone the next. And, it definitely wasn't a situation where God caused Billy to retire and leave this family of faith alone to deal, all by ourselves, with a mixture of anxiety, worry, uncertainty, and maybe even fear.

In fact, I did my best to emphasize that God *was* present—that God was present with us that day, just as God is here and now present *with us* by the wonderful power of the Holy Spirit. As was the case then, and is still the case now, God is present in your anxious feelings and your worried feelings and in any potential fearful feelings. Very truly I tell you, God has been present through this entire interim season and search process because God knows that change does happen, just as surely as autumn follows summer, and spring will soon follow winter and so on. My friends, God is *always* present in everything, and that should be a very reassuring reminder for each of us.

Now, each of us in our own way—we are simply entering another new season in the life and ministry of God's people in this place, and it's an exciting time indeed.

God's People in the Bible

Going even further, what's going on here is nothing new for God's people here and everywhere. Back during my first sermon, I also talked about how the Bible is full of stories of God's people being called into new seasons—sometimes into circumstances they may not have wanted to do, as many of you may have thought back before we journeyed through this interim season together. The

stories of the Exodus and wandering in the wilderness are prime examples of this ... talk about a set of circumstances God's people may not have wanted to do ... because it didn't take too long after they escaped Egypt before they started moaning and groaning to go back. God's people had to learn new skills when they entered the wilderness—as they began a new season in their life and ministry together. And, then there are the stories of the early church in Acts, when God's people once again had to learn new skills as they began a new season in their life and ministry together.

And, never was there a time when God wasn't present—not in the Old Testament stories and not in the New Testament stories either—just as there has never been a time when God wasn't present with any of us. You were never abandoned in your journey and I was never abandoned in my journey. And, thankfully, God brought our journeys together. And, God has been with us every step of our way over the last 17 months. And, just look what we have accomplished together. Indeed, God is good and God is with us right here and right now ... and God always will be.

In fact, when you stop reading such Bible stories through the lens of anxiety, worry, uncertainty, and maybe even fear, you start to see how God wasn't just present, but God was also busy doing something **new!** Indeed, throughout scripture and throughout the history of the church, time and again God's people enter into new seasons and realize that God is simply not done with us—that God is still speaking and doing something new ... every ... single ... moment.

God Is Not Done With Us

And, once again, that should reassure us and remind us that God is never done with us! The prophet Isaiah once wrote that God said, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a ***new thing***; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” I simply love this passage of scripture because it's so full of hope and anticipation and excitement for what God is doing in us and through us and among us.

Good Words from God to Joshua

Now, I chose to also include the scripture reading from Joshua this morning because of how it echoes the sentiment of God’s beautiful intention to never abandon us. And, you can see God’s strength and presence infused throughout the Joshua passage ... God’s people had been wandering through the wilderness, being led by Moses through all those years, and finally they were staring across the Jordan River at the Promised Land. Yet, Moses was not allowed to cross over with his people, and the people lost their leader and friend. But, God was there with them, as God always had been. And, God had already identified their next leader and that person’s name was Joshua. And, in today’s passage God is speaking good words to Joshua—good words that I believe God is also speaking to us this day. My friends, listen and hear God speaking to us, as individual persons of faith *and* as the family of faith that you truly are—“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (v.5). “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (v.9).

Dr. Seuss—“Oh, the Places You’ll Go”

These words from God to Joshua always remind me of my favorite Dr. Seuss book, “Oh, the Places You’ll Go,” which I also referenced in the February newsletter that you should have recently received in the mail. Although I had been exposed to most all of Dr. Seuss’ books as a child, I really fell in love with this particular book when it was given to me as a gift when I graduated high school. It’s a wonderful book to read whenever a transition is occurring and a new chapter in life is about to begin. Of course, I realize that the book is written in a way that is directed at individual persons, but I also think it speaks to groups and communities of people just as easily.

So as I read aloud this portion from the end of Dr. Seuss’ book, listen and hear these words speak to you collectively, as a community of faith—as a *family of faith*. Hear these words as words of confidence and words of hope:

But on you will go though the weather be foul.
On you will go though your enemies prowl.
On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl.
Onward up many a frightening creek,
though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak.

On and on you will hike, And I know you'll hike far
and face up to your problems whatever they are.

You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know.
You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go.
So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act.
Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.
And never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)

KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!

(But, as I wrote at the end of the newsletter article, I invite you to hear those words as ... “children of God, you’ll move mountains!”)

Wherever We Go, God is With Us

My friends, I know transitions can be scary. There’s just too much unknown in it all. But, I pray you see as I do that this interim season hasn’t been near as frightful as you might have imagined. Likewise, the new season you are entering won’t be either. As a matter of fact, it will be even better. I know it will. I know it in my heart.

So be strong and courageous. Be still and know that God has got this. God is with us—right here and right now—and God always will be. Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord our God is with us wherever we go.

Let us pray ... Good and gracious God, help us to remember that every beginning has its ending and every ending has a new beginning, and you are in the midst of all of it. Strengthen us with hope and courage so that we can continue to move mountains, loving and serving you, this community, and the entire world in all that we say and do. For we pray through Jesus Christ, our living and loving Lord. And, let all God's people say ... Amen.