

Sermon "Imagine a New Future" CHC 6-7-2015

Joshua 1:5b-9

I Corinthians 16:13

Last Sunday was a true celebration of Rick and Mary Ann's twelve years of ministry with FPCC. Rick challenged us to keep centered on Christ as we proceed through this time of transition. However, as we go forward, we have to ask what that will look like for us and how we will live into that.

Last Monday, the first day I arrived at the office in my new role, I saw the empty parking space. Rick's car will no longer be there. A wave of grief rolled over me. As that grief followed me into the church it enfolded me completely when I saw the empty office. I needed time to grieve the loss, to face the reality that life will go on. Anxiety began to surface. Not only is Rick gone, but also Veronica, Dave, Laura, and Jan by the end of the month.

There are twelve common triggers of anxiety in congregations. You can guess most of them because we experience them personally as well: money, worship style changes, sexuality issues, a pastor's leadership style, old versus new, growth and survival, resignations of staff members (five?), internal versus an external focus, major trauma, tension, or transition, harm done to or death of a child, property (building, space, and territory issues), and the gap between what is and what we believe ought to be.

Some of these real life issues and feelings are impacting the Israelites as their long time beloved leader is now dead. What will happen? Standing on the precipice of the Promised Land with God's command to cross over the Jordan and take it, Israel remembers being here before, forty years earlier to be exact. At that time fear and anxiety overpowered faith. There is always a question, both in our personal lives and corporate life as a church. It is true for businesses, colleges and universities, social clubs or whatever group of people gathered for a common goal and purpose. Will we get through this? Will we survive? From time to time different individuals have said to Rick and me that FPCC is going to die based on demographics. We will if we sit down and have a picnic refusing to follow God's call, and exercise trust and faith. Faith is active, not passive. God cannot direct a stationary object.

Israel's experience is our experience, Israel's choices our choices. It is the human experience. One choice is to hook into our anxiety. 'Ananke', anxiety, derives from the root that spreads through Old Egyptian, Chaldean and Hebrew terms for 'narrow', 'throat', 'strangle', 'constrict', and the yokes and rings laid on the captives. Ananke takes you by the throat, holds you prisoner, and drives you like a slave...both 'angina' and 'anxiety' derive from Ananke (James Hillman 'Healthy Congregations', p.14).

We become anxious and can't see beyond ourselves and our circumstances. That is why Paul writes to an anxious church saying, "Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6). Believe that God knows and hears. Trust that God will lead and guide. The ensuing gift is the peace of Christ that passes all understanding.

So it is no wonder that God speaks to us through Joshua and says “do not be frightened or dismayed”. One thing is certain. Though God’s servants die or move on, God’s work goes on. One Hundred Fifty plus years of the life of FPCC affirms that truth. Many pastors and other servants have come and gone. But God’s ministry is given life, energy, purpose, and is sustained through the person of Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and also the Head of the Church.

Craig Barnes makes the observation that Jesus won’t let us settle down. We are constantly being led away from places we would rather stay and taking us to places we would rather not go. When Jesus says “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”, and then he tells us to “Follow me”, our lives as his followers take on the aspirations of the one who calls us. This means the life of the church as a community as well.

I remember my first ordained and installed call after I graduated from Louisville Seminary. It was to the First Presbyterian Church of Helena, Montana. It was my home state and I began to envision a life there. The vision and conversation was more in my mind than it was between Betty and me.

But then things changed dramatically. Jesus obviously wasn’t going to allow me to settle down with my watered down dreams. The pastor I came to share ministry with didn’t know how to do that very well. There were some other things going on with him that required the intervention of the Session and Presbytery. Within six months he was gone and I was ‘it’ for the next year and a half, assuming both the associate and full pastoral requirements. I was working hard but not very smart. Betty tried to raise questions but my ego was too engaged, over functioning, doing things ‘for God’. I didn’t have the capacity to listen to the common sense voice of the Spirit through anyone else. I’m sure Betty is thinking, perhaps dying to ask me, if I have learned anything, and will it be different this time.

God has ways of getting through. I wasn’t giving up on my dreams and submitted an application for the position of pastor. During that time a gifted woman from Oakland, CA, was volunteering to assist in leading the youth groups. They grew and just made me busier since I wouldn’t let go. We planned a big retreat and invited a Presbyterian pastor from Oakland to be the retreat leader and speaker. God used this moment to begin wresting me away from my agenda.

As my dreams for receiving a call to that church were beginning to fade I was offered the opportunity to apply for the associate position where this pastor served in Oakland. But as I dragged my feet in the process, Betty didn’t drag her prayer life. She wanted out of Montana at that point. Well, Betty and her prayer life won and by that time I was on her side, at least more on God’s side.

However, I recall a Jonah moment in California, my dream still pulling at me, hearing the Spirit clearly remind me that this earth is not our ‘home’. We are, as Peter writes, “aliens and exiles” (I Peter 2:11). God keeps pulling and pushing us toward a promise that we cannot see.

Here the Israelites stand, just like us before the challenges and changes in our lives, betwixt and between. Along the way our lives are being pruned. God is working through, in, and around us. That’s grace, undeserved favor and merit. On the way we are being invited to drop the things we are carrying but deeply cherish (Barnes, p.55).

Each day we make a choice to continue following Jesus or turn back and grab the old knapsack. A wonderful image of this comes from the Benedictine community during medieval Europe. All of the monks wore habits of simple, unimpressive cloth. It was a symbol of their spiritual journey. The novice would surrender his old clothes for the new habit. But the old clothes were not discarded. They remained in the monastery closet as a reminder to the novice that should he ever desire to leave, the old clothes were waiting for him. This option reminded them that they had to choose their vocation to follow Jesus every day (Barnes, p.57).

We as a church have the same choice during every meeting and gathering. In the face of transition and change the words of God through Joshua ring just as true for us today as then; "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" (vs.9).

God makes it clear that our faith must not be in the ground on which we stand, but in the person with whom we are standing, Jesus Christ present to us through the Holy Spirit. The Psalmist David got it right when he asked, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast"(Psalm 139:7-10).

God is always leading us forward, pushing us toward a promise we cannot see. But it is God's promise and God stays with us each step of the way. Wherever we go tomorrow, whatever happens, that is where Jesus will meet us. What matters is not so much the destination, but the relationship and what is going on in within that relationship. Is there trust? Is there faith? Is there surrender to the person and purpose of our Lord?

Psychologists tell us that fear is most intense when we feel that the world is uncertain and a place to be feared. Fear can be instilled when we feel utterly alone with only our own wits to survive. But we meet the challenge rooted in the certain conviction that God will never leave or forsake us. We believe that God will be active in the midst of our life situations, not necessarily changing them to our liking, but offering unexpected strength, resources, and support. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you".

William Shackleton's exploration party became lost in the forbidden waste of the Arctic in the late 30's, stumbling through the swirling drifts, freezing to the bone from the biting wind and cold, dead with fatigue. Shackleton writes in his journal, "There was always a Voice who roused us when we were asleep, always a Hand who pulled us back from the precipice, always One who saved us. That is why we stand before you today".

We do two things simultaneously. We let go and we hang on. As a child I was fascinated watching the trapeze artists in the circus fly through the air. There is that moment when the trapeze bar is released while the trapeze artist is grasping the oncoming trapeze bar or reaching out to take the hand of the oncoming trapeze artist hanging from that new bar.

God is calling us to grasp hold of a new future that God is calling us into. We have our own promised land that God is calling us to possess. But there are also specific directions we must follow, things we are called to do in order to negotiate the new terrain successfully. Stay connected to God and each other. Nurture our faith focus. Joshua says, "Don't turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night....for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful" (vs. 7-9).

We are called to stay focused on Christ and the mission he has called us to serve. Our focus is not on 'getting along', the past, survival, waiting for the new pastor, or some other thing or issue.

May Christ's invitation to join him at this table center us and keep us focused upon his call and mission. He is central to all we are and do. Our commitment here places us in a stream that flows in a certain direction. We don't know until the end what entering the stream of Christ's Spirit will bring. There may be whitewater or turbulence. There will be surprises, new directions to respond to. But centered here we have all we need for the journey.