

**November 2, 2014**

**TEXT: Joshua 3:14-17**

**TITLE: Stepping Forward by Faith**

In many ways, the whole message of faith is being proclaimed in this morning's worship service. We've gathered to praise God, revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We've remembered the saints – those who have preceded us in life and death. We have prayed for justice, read holy scripture, and taught our children. We have baptized and welcomed new members. We will receive offerings as an act of stewardship. And we will share the communion meal as an act of unity before re-entering the world beyond these walls. This service is a snapshot of the entire Christian faith – remember that.

But to add one more item to this checklist of faith, I want to speak briefly about Joshua chapter 3, which to me is one of the most Presbyterian stories in the entire bible. Now, John Calvin lived in the 1500s and Joshua lived about 1200 BC – so how can this be a Presbyterian bible story? Well, I'm glad you asked, because there are five ways this is a Presbyterian story of faith. Last week we heard about Moses being on Mt. Nebo at the end of his life. This great leader would die and be replaced by a successor, Joshua. When Moses led the people out of Egypt, he stood on the banks of the Sea of Reeds, raised his staff and parted the waters so that the Israelites could pass through to freedom on dry ground. Now the Israelites were camped on the banks of the Jordan River, ready to cross into the Promised Land. How would Joshua lead them forward?

Presbyterian Way #1: Joshua does not act on his own; rather, he selects leaders from out of the congregation. This is not a story of Moses parting the waters. This is not Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments or the re-make with Christian Bale coming soon to a theatre near you. Joshua has the people select leaders from out of their ranks, like an ancient Hebrew Presbyterian nominating committee. Those selected are not yet told what they are to do, but since when has any leader or any church officer fully understood the work required of them prior to accepting their position? #1) To move forward by faith, the people chose their leaders themselves.

Presbyterian Way #2: The leaders chosen were a diverse group of people. They didn't all come from two or three tribes; rather it was one leader from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Still today, in every important gathering, we need to look around and ask, "Who is not present at this table? Whose voice is not part of our decision-making process?" Leadership always needs to be diverse because life on God's earth is diverse. So women, men, young, old, immigrant, citizen, poor, wealthy, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, housed, homeless need to be part of the leadership pool and worshipping communities of faith.

This past week, in my role as co-moderator of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, I attended a three day church meeting that brought together

people working for marriage equality and full inclusion of LGBT church leaders (such as Covenant Network, More Light, and That All May Freely Serve) with Presbyterians not firmly convinced of those goals (such as Next Church, Presbyterians for Renewal, and the Fellowship). It was the fourth such leadership gathering we've had, with the goal of being in dialogue so that all churches will choose to stay in our denomination. I'm pleased to report that everyone at this meeting was committed to staying together. And while evangelicals and progressives still differ on things, we need to stay together and acknowledge one another's voice, witness, and passion if we are to reach any version of the God's kingdom today. That was an important reminder that came out of our meeting.

Presbyterian Way #3: The church is called to lead the way in this world. We heard how after Joshua had the people select leaders from their respective groups, the priests picked up the Ark of the Covenant and everyone followed them. The Ark of the covenant was the gold case holding the Ten Commandment stone tablets received on Mt. Sinai. More importantly, it was the symbol of the Lord's presence in the midst of the people. The ark wasn't a weapon of war – it wasn't a platinum credit card. It was the Ark of the Covenant - a witness to the living God, and as such it needed to be out front, leading the way forward.

The church should always be out front. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail:" *Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being 'disturbers of the peace.' But the Christians pressed on, convinced they were called to obey God rather than man. The church is not merely a thermometer recording the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it is a thermostat that transforms the [values] of society.*<sup>1</sup>

Presbyterian Way #4: When we follow the Ark of the Covenant, we walk by faith, not by sight. The powerful reminder of this fact in this bible story is that the waters didn't recede until the sandals of the priests carrying the ark actually stepped into the river. No "wait and see" attitude; no pushing someone else forward and promising them you've got their back. We are to step forward by faith and in that act, the waters will recede. The river will part. The way of justice is revealed. For the path ahead to become clear, you must first step in the water.

That is part of the power of the sacrament of baptism – when we move through water to new and deeper life in Christ. But in general, most waters in life are stormier than that found in baptism fonts. Yet that must not deter or dissuade us. In the act of living our faith, we discover what faith is all about. Not vice versa. That has always been true – and by God's grace and the love of Christ, it is a promise we can trust as each of us, some point or another, has to step into the water.

And lastly, Presbyterian Way #5: through our stewardship of abilities and assets, we carry stones forward so all may trust and believe. Remember the twelve

leaders chosen from the tribes – this diverse group not told originally what was required of them? Well, after the entire nation crossed the Jordan River, this Presbyterian committee of twelve leaders had to go back and pull up twelve stones from the riverbed – and then carry them for a full day’s journey until the people rested for the night. In Joshua’s time, the stones were stacked together as a memorial of what the Lord has done for them. In our time, the stones we are to carry represent what it means to be the church – the body of Christ. So we carry stones and place them together: a stone for Sunday school teachers, for mission committees, for the choir, for visitors of shut-in members, for sanctuary door greeters, for volunteers who make coffee and casseroles and write cards, for prayer partners and sermon writers and offering counters, for informed voters and voices for change, for hymn singers and pledge card submitters. Toss one person’s stone to the side and the entire memorial will become unsteady. Omit one stone and the whole structure begins to teeter.

Today has been a snapshot about what it means to follow Christ and belong to a Presbyterian church. Our worship is about praising the God who is beside us for our life’s journey, even if the stones we are asked to carry and the gifts we offer are different from the person right next to us in the pew. Our stewardship is about giving resources sacrificially and consistently, so that all the church stones may be solid, not just the ones we like and use. And our faith is about carrying stones from the Jordan River out through this church and into the world – until our day is done and at last we lay down our load to rest.

Earlier I read up to Joshua 4:3. I’ll close by reading some of the verses that followed thereafter. *Then Joshua summoned the twelve from each tribe of the Israelites, and said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on your shoulder. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the Lord. And so these stones (your stones) shall be a memorial forever. Step forward by faith – for worship, for mission, for stewardship – and watch as the waters part and the witness of the Lord is revealed to our children and children’s children for ages to come.*

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Derrick Bell, Ethical Ambition, 2002, p. 80-1.