

## Character and Virtue: Courage

Joshua 1:1-9

March 26, 2023

Times of transition create tenderness, tension, and trepidation. The shift from one chapter of life to the next, from one place to the next, brings a dizzying array of possibilities and much uncertainty.

Transitions in leadership are particularly charged. There is the understandable desire to cling to the way things were and the person who brought us there. There is skepticism about the new leader and the inevitability of change on the horizon.

The reality is that we are always in some kind of transition. It is as true of individuals as it is of communities. Change is the only constant. Change is rarely welcomed. Change is never easy.

Moses was dead. The great leader with a direct line to God, the liberator of the oppressed, the one who had stood toe-to-toe with Pharaoh, parted the waters of the Red Sea, and guided the people through the wilderness to the very edge of the land of promise, was gone. It was as if the center of the web had been removed and God's people left flapping in the wind. Anxiety was high. There was tenderness, tension, and even trepidation. The eyes of the people turn to the leader chosen by God to fill some very big sandals.

The book that bears his name begins with the announcement to Joshua (*my servant Moses is dead*) followed immediately by instructions for what comes next (*now cross the river Jordan into the land that I have promised you*).

That's one way to do transition. *Moses is dead. Get on with it.* There are only two problems that I can find. Joshua has never been a leader, and there are already people living in that land. Surely there were whispers, maybe murmurs. I like Josh, but he's no

Moses. *Good kid, just not sure he has what it takes. I'd like to see him part a river. I remember when he was a teenager.*

Like every leader in a time of change, Joshua has his own insecurities, exacerbated by the long shadow of his prominent predecessor. And this is why this first encounter is so instrumental. God speaks directly to Joshua, and the message is not ambiguous. If it wasn't clear the first time, God repeats it twice more. Here it is:

*I will be with you. Be strong. Have courage.*

Courage is this Sunday's virtue. When we think of the word, when we read it in the stories of scripture or the narratives of history, we are tempted to lift it beyond our reach. The courageous in our imagination are those heroes whose stories we remember for centuries, whose one act of bravery turned the course of world events.

But what if courage is less about a single dramatic act and more about daily decisions?

To be sure, Joshua's encounter with God this morning is high drama, but it is only the beginning of a long journey these two will share. The instruction to be strong and courageous—like the promise of divine presence—is meant to last, to be lived out a little each day in small ways that might seem insignificant.

So let me suggest to you this morning that there is more to courage than audacity, or Herculean acts of strength, or superhuman bravery. Let me suggest to you this morning that the kind of courage that God demands of Joshua is not exercised in brute force or reckless confidence, that courage is an inclination of the heart shaped by practice.

Ironically, courage begins with the kind of self-examination that might first appear as weakness. Let me explain. For Aristotle, the virtue of courage stands between the vices of rashness and cowardice. Both extremes result from insufficient attention to our fear. Courage requires self-examination that reckons with our stifling anxieties. For Joshua, this means coming to terms with external fears (*There are giants in the land*) and internal fear (*Am I strong enough to lead?*). Those fears are real, and minimizing or ignoring them will not serve Joshua well. He must name them. He must face them. And then he must find the courage to move, not around his fear but through it.

Lent is a time of self-examination. These holy weeks allow us to name and face the fears we are tempted to hide, even from ourselves. What is it that holds you back, that keeps you from living courageously? Which fears do you need to acknowledge so that you are no longer constrained by them? Is it the fear of failure? Of judgment? Of shame? Do you harbor the fear that you are inadequate? That your faith is simply not strong or consistent enough? Are you afraid of stepping up or speaking out and being left to stand and speak alone? This is the season to face those fears in our own hearts...and in the church.

Remember the words spoken to Joshua. There is the command. *Be strong and have courage.* But the command is never separated from the promise. *I will be with you.* And then, perhaps addressing the specific fear of this young, burgeoning leader—*just as I was with Moses so I will be with you.* Listen to this truth. It is faith that makes us brave. It is the assurance of God's presence that gives us the courage to stand and to speak. I am absolutely persuaded that true courage is not the absence of fear, for fear is endemic to the human condition. Courage is the refusal to allow our fear to control us.

In my experience, this is a daily—sometimes hourly—decision. It involves reminding myself that I am not alone. That I am part of a larger story, a grander vision. That my words and my actions matter. Remember that all virtues are cultivated over time by repetition and the accountability of community. I would suggest that most of the time courage does

not simply materialize or appear in our lives. That it is grown. That it is deepened by prayer and practice. That it is supported by the presence of others seeking the same.

Think of Joshua. This one moment stands out, but it is just one moment. Joshua has been shaped by the community that surrounds him. Joshua's gifts have been encouraged and affirmed. Joshua has been mentored in intentional ways throughout his life, seemingly small moments that build those courage muscles so that they will be ready when he needs them most. Beloved pastor Eugene Peterson summarized this practice as "a long obedience in the same direction."

It occurs to me that most of the time our battle is not the high stakes drama between doing good or doing evil. Most days, our real choice is between doing good or doing nothing, speaking or remaining silent, risking action or sitting on the sidelines.

I confess that I worry the community of faith has been characterized by a regrettable lack of courage. I can understand why. We live in a time of such rapid and uncontrolled change. Fear is the very air we breathe. Uncertainty surrounds us. And in such times, we tend to turn toward timidity, hunker down, focus on our own survival, or reminisce about the glory days of old. *Do you remember when Moses parted the Red Sea?* The temptation to live in the past may be understandable, but it is not faithful. The call of faith compels courage rooted in the promise.

Like Joshua, we are promised the presence of God in those moments when we must act bravely or speak boldly. Author Marilynne Robinson speaks of this presence as "prevenient courage." I love that—the idea that courage is a gift of God's grace that goes ahead of us.

So here are two questions we might wrestle with this week.

*What would be different if you were not controlled by your fear?*

*What would you do if you were confident God was with you?*

I think I might be willing to step out in faith and dream a little bigger. I think I might be willing to risk a broader and a bolder love. I think I might be brave enough to believe and work for a city that more closely resembles God's vision of beloved community, where the needs of neighbors are met, where the abundance received is extended, where compassion is the starting place for all our interactions, where we are always curious before we are judgmental.

Joshua stands on the cusp of a new chapter, called to lead with courage, promised the constant companionship of God.

I hear it everywhere I go. Second Presbyterian Church is a leader in our city. We have been given the same call and the same promise. What is this influence and capacity for if it is not to be used to further God's work in our city? What is this gift of grace all about if not to make us brave?

Listen, my friends. Religious faith is being misused and manipulated in ways that only serve to divide us, that prey on our deepest fears. We are taught and told to be anxious for the future, wary of our neighbors. We are encouraged to listen to the loudest voices, and the quiet stirring of our hearts that speaks of a better way is muted. We are tempted to believe the prognosticators who see only doom, demise, and despair. But we do not have to believe it.

Courage looks like naming our fears and moving through them to a faith that brings us together in pursuit of a larger goal. Friends, that is what communities of courageous leadership do. So, what is that goal? The promised land. A community, a beloved community, for all God's children.

I read somewhere that courage is fear that has said its prayers. The fear remains. But confidence in God's strength urges us on, compels us to act and speak. Sometimes this takes the shape of public proclamation and protest. Other times it involves more subtle displays of strength, refusing to participate with harmful acts or give your assent to hateful words. When you are afraid and the future is uncertain, remember the One who always goes before you, who has conquered the world.

Have courage. God is with us. Amen.