

Safe Passage

Joshua 3:7-17

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

On this Reformation Sunday, I want to talk about courage, and some of the faithful who have demonstrated courage in history. Transitions in leadership are never easy, and they never have been. It is true for nations, for churches, for athletic teams, and for companies. You only need to read the newspaper headlines to see the truth of that statement. Apple is concerned about leadership transition following the death of Steve Jobs. Egypt and Libya are only the most glaring examples of regime change, but other nations are facing a crisis in leadership too.

Our text today is about the succession of leadership from Moses to Joshua, a successful transition in leadership by all accounts. Moses left some pretty big sandals to fill, and Joshua was equal to the task, in part because he was courageous and God was with him. Joshua is the one many of us learned about in the Sunday school song “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho.” God miraculously overcame obstacles similar to the ones Moses faced on the journey through the wilderness. Joshua stood on the banks of the Jordan River prepared to lead others into the Promised Land, and he knew there was no turning back.

Courage has been needed in every century. In the 16th century Martin Luther was called before Johann von Eck, who was acting on behalf of the Emperor Charles V. He presented Luther with his own writings on April 17, 1521 and asked if he still believed what he previously wrote. Luther consulted friends and prayed and then replied the next day, “. . . it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me.”¹ The Reformation of Christ’s Church found traction in that stand. Countless women and men throughout history have taken difficult stands, finding the courage to overcome their fears by faith in difficult moments.

¹ Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Response to the Inquisition at the Diet of Worms* German religious reformer (1483 - 1546) as found on <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/37886.html>

There is a familiar idiom that many know: "Crossing the Rubicon." The Rubicon is a river in Northeastern Italy. In 49 B.C.E., Julius Caesar's army crossed the Rubicon, the boundary between the Roman Province to the north and Italy proper to the south. In doing so, he deliberately broke the law and made armed conflict inevitable. "Crossing the Rubicon" has come to mean, "passing the point of no return." Joshua crossing the Jordan, and Martin Luther declaring, "Here I stand!" were both examples of "crossing their Rubicon." It was a point of no return.

What transitions are you facing today on your way to a place of promise? Are you starting a family, or starting a job? Are you in a serious relationship considering a commitment? Are you adjusting to the loss of a loved one or dealing with illness or limitation of some kind? We all need Joshua's kind of courage in the face of life's challenges. Are you ready to pass the point of no return? You can't play it safe forever! What ground are you willing to take a stand upon? Does your faith call you to any difficult stands?

For people of faith, like Joshua and Luther, it is not so much that they had to stand their ground, (though they did that!) but their ground stands them. Once we are grounded in God's love and faithfulness, known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, our feet are firmly planted on solid ground and we become more courageous in our living and in our believing.

One of the truly remarkable moments in human history was the day George Washington left the office of the Presidency, after serving as the first President of the United States. He went home and turned over the reigns of government to John Adams, the second President. And now we have the 44th President in office, Barak Obama. The orderly transition (for the most part) of leadership has occurred forty three times. The balance of power, and government "of the people, by the people, and for the people"² was an idea that was first shaped in the churches of the Reformation period, and importantly in the Kirk of Scotland before it became a national political

² Levin, Jack & Mark, *Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address Illustrated*, Threshold Editions; Ill edition (May 4, 2010)

philosophy. Twelve signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians, and the only clergy person, John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian Minister.³

Now, before I go too far and credit too much to the Scots, let me remind you that they also created and gave to the world the game of golf: that unholy and absolutely frustrating addiction that many of you have contracted, along with me. Unfortunately I seem to be entirely unsuited for it. “I play in the low 80’s but if it gets any hotter than that, I won’t play.” There is important religious education that sometimes occurs on the golf course. In 1975, after being struck by lightning on a golf course at the Western Open, Lee Trevino was asked by a reporter, what he would do the next time it began to storm on a golf course? Trevino replied, “I will take out a one iron and point it to the sky, because not even God can hit a one iron.” We have thankfully received much more than golf from Scotland.

The issues once faced in the British Isles: religious freedom, governmental interference, and even persecution, are taking place today on the other side of the globe. In his book *God is Red*, Liao Yiwu, one of the most outspoken writers in China today, (He was imprisoned for his critique of the governments handling of Tiananmen Square in 1989), writes about the resurgence of Christianity in China. It is estimated there are 70 million practicing Christians in China, the largest formal religion. Unregistered and underground “house churches” have developed in both rural and urban areas. The government tries to control this growth by requiring all churches belong to either the Three Self Patriotic Movement (Protestants) or the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Christians are arrested for seeking religious freedom from government-controlled churches and for publishing unauthorized Christian literature. Courageous leaders are taking a stand in China much as they did in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. They are crossing their Jordan, (their Rubicon) because of their beliefs and Yiwu is telling their stories. A reformation is underway in China and our congregation helps to support some of the work of the Church in Yunan Province.

³ Loetscher, Lefferts A., *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, Fourth Edition, Westminster John Knox Press, Jan. 1984

Life requires courage. Faith provides it! Robert Frost wrote, "Courage is the human virtue that counts most, courage to act on limited knowledge and insufficient evidence . . ." ⁴ Joshua had that kind of courage. John Knox did too. He crossed his "Jordan" while at St. Andrews Castle with other Christians under siege by the French in the 16th century. A preacher by the name of John Rough called John Knox to the ministry with these words, "In the name of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ, and in the name of these that presentlie calles yow by my mouth, I charge yow that ye refuse not this holy vocatioun." ⁵ Knox was later taken prisoner by the French when they captured St Andrews. For 19 months he rowed in a French galley and then was exiled for almost 12 years. He returned home to Scotland in 1559. By that time the Protestants had swelled in number and the whole land was restless and ripe for reformation. John Knox had the courage to lead them.

The freedoms we enjoy today are not really free. They came at great cost, but the cost was not ours. The cost was borne by others and so we are inclined to take them for granted. Today we celebrate joyfully our history and embrace the faith they so nobly and courageously fought for and passed on to us.

John Bunyan was imprisoned for his faith in the 17th century, where he conceived and wrote an allegorical novel about the Christian faith known as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In it he tells the story of another river crossing, as Christian is making his way to the celestial city. Mr. Valiant-for-Truth comes to the Great River and must cross over to the other side, a final river crossing from this life to the next. Here is Bunyan's description:

Mr. Valient for Truth called for his friends and said, "I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I have arrived here, I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I gave to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. May marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought God's battles who now will be my rewarder. When that day he must go hence was come,

⁴ *The Robert Frost Reader: Poetry and Prose*, Holt Paperbacks, April 1, 2002

⁵ Barnett Smith, George, *John Knox: The Hero of the Scottish Reformation*, General Books LLC, Jan 10, 2010

many accompanied him to the river side . . . So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.⁶

We all have rivers to cross in life (our Rubicons or Jordans) and we all surely will cross the “Great River” at the end of life. It takes courage, like Joshua’s, to leave the safety of the past and venture into an unknown future full of risks. The word “courage” comes from the word for heart in old French. There is a spirit and energy that comes when we are not of divided heart. To encourage is to “enhearten.” It is to have your heart renewed. We are renovating our hearts in this season of our life together as a congregation so let us be of good courage!

What are you prepared to stand up for what is right, this week? Will you take a stand for your faith, and rely upon your faith in Jesus Christ? Perhaps you have been shrinking from some task that will require more courage than you have mustered up so far. Perhaps you have been waiting for greater insight or a clearer vision before taking any action. Maybe God has already given you enough. Acting on limited knowledge and insufficient evidence is the very definition of courage! “Walk by faith and not by sight,”⁷ says the New Testament. Believe in more than you can see. And the God who promises to be with us, as God was with Joshua, and Luther, and Knox, and Bunyan, will be your guide, your companion, and your protector, thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

⁶ Bunyan, John, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, London England, 1940. P. 308.

⁷ II Corinthians 5:7