

Old Testament Lesson—Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Old Testament Lesson—Joshua 1:1-9

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "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. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 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. 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. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 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. 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. 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."

Before I really get into this, let me set the record straight first—before anyone jumps to conclusions or thinks I'm suddenly oozing with arrogance just one Sunday into my new role here—just one Sunday into a new beginning of sorts for this community...

First, and let me say this very clearly...I am not Joshua, and Pastor Dave is not Moses. And, for good measure, the Cedar River is not the Jordan. No, I'm not using this sermon to compare myself to Joshua or Dave to Moses. I promise my ego has become so inflated in a week! Lord, have mercy...

Though, to be fair, I sometimes *wish we were* entering into some version of the Promised Land—somewhere flowing with milk and honey—a place free from chaos and war and uncertainty—where cooler heads always prevailed, and empathy was (without question) the greatest value of society.

If there *was* a river we could cross and end up there—in *that* kind of place—Lord knows I wouldn't hesitate. And I don't think you would either.

And yet, I think it's important to remind ourselves that the story of God's people wasn't all unicorns and rainbows—even after entering the so-called Promised Land. Awaiting them were plenty of green pastures (yes) and more than enough dark valleys.

The same might be said about the story of God's people today...

Over the next few Sundays in June, as we begin a new journey together, I'd like to explore stories of transition in Scripture. What does the Bible have to say about times like these?

What does our faith have to teach us about navigating new beginnings—about turning the page at the close of a long chapter? How do we faithfully respond to change?

Thankfully, I *know* these ancient stories have a TON to say about it—both leadership transitions (like turning from Moses to Joshua) and about cultural change more broadly.

After all, change is inevitable. Right? One could argue everything is constantly in a state of transition. We live in a dynamic world full of both progression and regression.

In fact, in a world that feels increasingly fluid, us pastors have started to think of all ministry as transitional. In other words, God is always on the move.

As the prophets like to say, God is always doing a new thing. God has never stopped creating—never stopped making things new.

Along the same lines, Christ is always moving from place to place—leading us in new directions. If you read through the gospels, you'll see that he never stays in the same area for very long.

He's roaming around a lot—always coming and going. Or, as Pastor Dave's quite fond of saying: Jesus is ___ ___ ___ (on the loose).

Now, the Hebrew peoples (of course) were quite familiar with roaming around—too familiar in fact—fed up and at their wit's end would be more accurate.

The formerly enslaved of Egypt, under Moses' leadership, had been roaming the Middle eastern desert for decades—for generations—forty years of wandering in the wilderness...

...forty years of journeying toward an unknown destination—an eternity really—especially by ancient standards...and not a single Casey's in all that time! Just dreadful...

In all seriousness, though, this was a difficult time for God's people (to put it mildly). You see: Freedom came with its own set of challenges and hardships. At least when they were slaves, there was a learned rhythm to their bondage.

At least, in those days, life carried on with a sense of certainty and consistency. You knew what to expect. Inadequate shelter was still *some* shelter. Bad food was still *some* food.

Their liberation from tyranny also meant learning a new way of being—a new way of living. It meant forming a new identity, together, over time.

And you know what? They did just that—eventually—more or less. They had to out of necessity. They were given a set of laws to bind them to God and to each other.

And after annoying the “you-know-what” out of Moses, God was merciful toward the people—and blessed them with miraculous bread from heaven and fresh water from a rock.

And when after years and years of “one step forward, two steps back,” when after decades of identity formation, they finally reach the Jordan River, only to learn something that not only crushes their spirits, but threatens also to sow discord and trigger old anxieties...

Now, on the doorstep of Canaan, at the gates of the Promised Land, they’re told things are about to change. Their leader, liberator, and Lawgiver was about to die. Their prophet and prayer-partner—the Prince of Egypt would soon be laid to rest.

Moses’ journey was at an end—his story complete on *this* side of the Jordan.

As for the other side of the river, well...It was time for God to do something new...

By the way, it’s worth pointing out that Moses wasn’t the only one who died before reaching the Promised Land. Remember, God’s people wandered for generations. So it’s reasonable to assume that many—maybe even most, never got to see the next chapter begin.

Forty years...that’s a whole Pastor Johnny, y’all...In a sense, Moses represents the last of that first generation out of Egypt—all those who never got to set their feet on the holy ground beyond the Jordan.

I’m reminded of modern-day prophets—those like Dr. King who never got to see their dream realized—never reached the destination, but who worked faithfully and fiercely no matter the horizons ahead.

Because, the truth is...for everything there is a season...a time to start the journey, and a time for the journey to end...a time for leaders to lead, and a time for them to retire.

And though Moses was going home to God, God wasn’t going anywhere—at least, nowhere without God’s people. Never.

You see: That’s where the great sage of Ecclesiastes is wrong. For everything there is a season, yes. But there is never a time for God’s absence—never a time for God to be gone—never a time that God isn’t guiding, isn’t creating, isn’t present with us—especially in seasons of transition—especially during times of profound change.

The next leader of the Hebrews, Moses’ successor Joshua, has some big sandals to fill, it’s true. No doubt about it. But imagine the sandals Moses had to fill. Imagine those carrying God’s covenant in the earliest days—the sandals of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah and Joseph.

If we take a step back, friends...If we intentionally look behind us, we’ll see the evidence of God’s presence and faithfulness in previous generations. We can bear witness to God’s guidance made real when we faced transitions before.

In fact: It’s one of the most biblical things we can do. There are too many examples of this in Scripture to count. When times are tough, when anxieties are high, God’s people remember. We remember. We literally list out when God showed up—like a mental rolodex of divine encounters—of the holy breaking into the ordinary—light piercing the darkness.

Think of those that showed up for you when it mattered the most—those that made the unbearable bearable. Remember that person who came over every day when your loved one was ill. Remember that friend who held your hand for weeks after your spouse left. Remember when that person sat for hours with us in silence as we cried and cried at the news we had to move across country.

Siblings in Christ: *That* is God’s faithfulness. *That* is God’s steadfast love made incarnate in your life—made visible in difficult seasons.

If past is prologue, then we can be certain God hasn't brought us this far to leave us without a shepherd—a good One—one who will never leave us nor forsake us.

By the way, if we were to keep reading in Joshua, we'd see one of the first things Joshua does is renew God's covenant with the people. He asks them to rededicate themselves to the Lord, to choose this day whom they will serve.

He wants to remind them that they aren't vowing to serve or follow him—just like they never served or followed Moses.

It's the living God they serve—that we serve. And that is good news. *That* is the reason we can be strong and courageous, come what may, because it is God that calls us together and sends us out.

It's God that will lead us in a direction of God's choosing, one both new and somehow familiar too. It's the Lord who will lead to where we're going, whether it's the land of promise or somewhere else.

And because it's *God* we follow—because it's *God* who sends us, we can be confident that the journey is worth taking. Thanks be to God.

Amen.