LOOKING BACK—THEN MOVING FORWARD

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 3:1-4  
Isaiah 40:27-31  

“Follow it [the ark of the covenant], so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.” (Joshua 3:4)

“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’” (Luke 9:62)

The Danish existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, my favorite philosopher, once said, “Most people don’t understand that while life must be understood backward, it can only be lived forward.” This is true of us as a nation; it is true of us as a church; and it is true of us as individuals.

Behind them lay the bleak, dry wilderness of the desert. Before them lay the swirling, foaming waters of the river that blocked their entrance into the Promised Land—a land where they could be free. This land had been their goal for many years, so many years that few among them could remember when this little tribal band had initially set out from Egypt. All they knew was that they needed a land of their own, a land where they could develop their own national and ethnic identity, where they could worship the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, had given them leaders like Moses and Aaron to follow, who had guided them through the wilderness, and who had kept them alive with manna from heaven and water from the rock.

Joshua, their newly appointed leader, was faced with a challenge, a challenge unlike any he had ever faced before. Joshua needed to lead them into new, unexplored, uncharted territory. Standing at the bank of the River Jordan, he realized this undertaking would not be easy.

A cursory glance over Joshua’s shoulder reminded him where his people had been. He was flooded with memories of the eighty years that the people of Israel had spent wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. Eighty years ago they had set out from Egypt. Forty years ago, standing at this very spot, they had made a big mistake. They had been confronted with a choice, decision, a challenge. And they had failed the test.

Forty years ago, when Moses was the leader of this Israelite band, they had stood before the River Jordan. Daunted and discouraged by the obstacles that lay before them, the reports of
the scouts about the size and fearsomeness of the Canaanites, they had refused to cross over the
Jordan. They did not have the courage to fight the battles that needed to be fought to take
possession of the land that God had promised them. They backed off from the challenge. As a
consequence, they spent an additional forty years in the wilderness.

If you look at a biblical map and locate the River Jordan, the eastern boundary of Canaan,
you can see that it shouldn’t have taken eighty years to go from Egypt to Canaan.

Because they lacked both vision and courage, an entire generation died before they
reached their goal. Because they did have enough trust to step forward into the challenge that life
had placed before them, God decreed that none of the original band except Caleb and Joshua
would enter the Promised Land. Moses, whom God called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt,
died within sight of the goal.

Standing on the bank of the river, Joshua was confronted with a decision. He began by
looking back. The years of desert sands, the years of aimless wilderness wandering were fresh on
his mind as he looked across the raging river to the heavily armed adversaries on the other side.
It was then that Joshua realized that “maintaining the status quo” was no longer an option. He
and his people stepped forward into the challenges and the opportunities that lay ahead.

Following our worship service, we will hold our church annual meeting. We will receive
the reports of our boards and committees concerning their activities this past year. We will
review the income and expense statements provided by our treasurer, and use this to help set the
budget for the coming year. I’m sure you will agree that we had an active year as a church. Our
identity as a community of faith shines forth from the reports of every aspect of our fellowship.

Then we will take a few moments to look forward. The occasion of our annual meeting
provides us with an opportunity not only to reflect on the past but also to dream about the future.
The challenge that we face is the same challenge that was faced by the ancient Israelites--to go
where God wants us to go, to become who God wants us to be. Like Joshua, we realize that even
though we have a deep and rich history, we have not passed this way before.

We can do this as a church, and we can also do this as individuals. Think for a moment
of your own life in the year that has just passed. Do you have a sense not only of all that you did,
but also of all that you did well? Can you look back on this past year with pride? You see, I
know all of you. Whether you claim it or not, I have a sense of the many really beautiful things
you have done, the sacrifices you have made for members of your family, the ways you have made this world a better place. I also have a sense of the burdens you have carried. To look back and affirm your life over the past year is not to fall prey to false pride; it is honestly owning who you are. As Dizzy Dean once said, “It ain’t bragging if you can do it.”

As a church we can look with pride at what we have done well this past year. We can look with pride at our worship, our ministry of music, our adult study groups. We can celebrate the extent to which intercessory prayer is an integral part of who we are. We can take pride in the care of our building and grounds, in the repaving of our parking lot. We can celebrate our mission outreach, not only in dollars but also in the contributions our members have made to the food pantry and various organizations in the community. We can look at the many ways we have reached out to each other in time of need. We have a lot to celebrate in our church.

As individuals, we also need to reflect on those aspects of our recent history that did not go as well as they should have. If we are not to become stuck in the status quo, we need to think about what we need to improve. When we look back on our past, we may have to admit that we did not always live out our deepest values. There were times when we were too petty, too mean-spirited, too self-centered to reach out to others. There may have been parts of our life that were out of control. We may not have grown spiritually in the ways God wants us to grow.

As a church, we need to reflect on those aspects of our recent history that did not go as well as they should have. We may not have been as faithful as we might have been in worship, not as consistent as we might have been in prayer, not as committed as we should have been to deepening our relationship with God. We need to challenge ourselves to make a stronger commitment to the stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure. We need to constantly look at the ways we can improve our church—its worship, its educational ministry, its fellowship, and its mission. Above all, we need to remember that it all begins with us.

If we as individuals and as a church are to follow Joshua’s example, we need to move forward. We need to become aware of the new life to which God is calling us. We need to step forward into the future with joyous anticipation.

God is calling us forth into fullness of life as Christians and as a Christian church. God has given us both the vision and the resources we need to live a deep and meaningful life. But
we need to respond. We need to place our hand in Jesus’ hand and walk with him in the year to come. We need to put our hand to the plow.

Finally, as individuals and as a church, we need to face into the obstacles and challenges that lie before us. The obstacles that life places before are not injustices; they are opportunities to grow. The Israelite entrance into Canaan was not a walk in the park. There were battles to be fought, and there were lean as well as rich times. The disciples who followed Jesus soon learned that life was not a bowl of cherries. There often was no place for them to lay their head. But they stepped forward into the future to which they were called.

Last Sunday morning the citizens of Duckville waddled their way to the First Community Duck Church. They made their way inside, quacking politely with each other, settling into their favorite pews. After a few familiar hymns, the duck minister took his place in the pulpit. He took his text, an inspirational text, from the Duck Bible. While his congregation looked up in rapt attention, he told them:

“Ducks, you know that God has given you feet. But God has also given you wings.”
All the ducks quacked, “Amen!”

“Ducks, God has given you wings for a purpose. You know you can waddle. But you can do more than waddle. God has given you wings so you can fly,”
All the ducks quacked, “Amen, brother!”

“Ducks,” the minister continued, “you won’t get very far by waddling. Your freedom lies in your ability to fly. Because God has given you wings to fly, no fence can confine you, no land animal can catch you, and no human being can trap or shoot you.”
All the ducks quacked, “That’s right, preacher! Preach on!”

“Ducks,” the ministered thundered from the pulpit, “God has given you wings as well as feet. He has given you wings for a purpose. Now, as individual ducks and here in our duck church, we need to take to the air! We need to fly!”

When the service was over, the ducks waddled out of the church. As they passed the Pastor, they quacked, “Good sermon, Pastor.” “Inspiring, Pastor.” “Thank you, Pastor; that was just what we needed to hear.”

Then they all waddled home. No one changed. No one did anything different. No one looked up to the skies. No one even spread his/her wings. And no one took flight.
“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

As individuals, as a church, and as a nation, if we follow Joshua’s example we will look backward to understand who we are and how far we have come. Then we need to move forward. We need to put our hand to the plow. As we commit ourselves to incarnate God’s spirit, to live out God’s will in our lives, to care for our brothers and sisters, to be co-creators with God of this wonderful, mysterious life that has been entrusted to us in the year to come, we step forward in faith knowing that God’s guiding, strengthening presence will be with us in our journey.

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