

LOOKING BACK—THEN MOVING AHEAD

(02/23/2025)

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 3:1-4
Isaiah 40:27-31
Luke 9:57-62

“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.

Take the Israelites of the Exodus, for example. 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, 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 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, a decision, a challenge. And they did not rise to the occasion. They 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 trust their leaders; they no longer trusted God’s promises. They lacked the courage to fight the battles that needed to be fought to take possession of the land to which God

was leading them. They backed off from the challenge. As a consequence, perhaps as a punishment, they spent an additional forty years in the wilderness.

If you look at a biblical map in the back of your Bible 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! The Israelites must have gotten lost along the way—both literally and figuratively.

Because they lacked both vision and courage, an entire generation of Israelites died before they reached their goal. Because they could not summon 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 in 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 had to step forward into the challenges and the opportunities that lay before them!

Following our worship service and a soup-and-sandwich luncheon organized by the women of the church, we will hold our church's 159th 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 the Investment Committee and use this to help set the budget for the coming year. As you read or listen to the reports, you will grasp how our identity as a community of faith shines forth from 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. The challenges that lie before us, the challenges of a small but dedicated fellowship, can mean the difference between the life and the death of our church.

We can create our future as a church, just as we can 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 your struggles, the difficult times you faced, but also of the things that went well? I know the struggles you faced and are still facing, the burdens you carried and are still carrying, but I also know the many really beautiful things you have done, the sacrifices you have made for members of your family,

the ways you have reached out to others, the ways you have made this church and this world a better place. 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 the St. Louis Cardinals Hall of Fame pitcher Dizzy Dean once said, “It ain’t bragging if you can do it.”

As a church that will be celebrating its 160th anniversary this coming fall, 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 ministry of pastoral care and counseling, our adult study group. 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. We can celebrate our mission outreach and the contributions our members have made to the Southborough food pantry. 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 little church!

As individuals, perhaps especially as we approach Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, we need to reflect on those aspects of our life that are not going as well as they might. If we are not to become stuck in the *status quo*, we need to think about how we can improve, how we can grow. When we look back on our past, we have to admit that we have not always lived 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 life that are not going as well as they might. We may not be as faithful as we might be in attending worship, not as consistent as we might be in prayer, not as committed as we should be to the process of 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 each of us as an individual, with who we are and the unique gifts we have to share with this little community of faith.

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. To use Jesus’ metaphor, 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 us as a church are not injustices; they are opportunities to grow. Remember, the Israelite entrance into Canaan was not a walk in the park! There were battles to be fought, challenges to be faced. There were times when they were

tempted to turn back, to be less than the people God called them to be. This is also true of Jesus' disciples. They soon learned that life, that their life was not a bowl of cherries! They were persecuted for their faith. But they stepped forward into the future to which they were called—and look at what they built!

Jesus not only wants us to be all that we can be as individuals and as a church; he not only calls us to be all that we can be as individuals and as a church; he assures us that he is walking with us on this journey. He assures us that, as we grow in the faith, we become co-creators with God of this amazing world, this amazing life! All we have to do is take his hand!

As we heard this morning, the prophet Isaiah tells us, “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.” If we dig down deep, we will find what we need to move forward, to create the future to which we are called, to help create a caring and compassionate church, a caring and compassionate nation, and a caring and compassionate world.

In the year to come, your church needs more than your financial support, though this is certainly very important. We need you! We need just what you have to share with us and what you have to share with the world through us. And you need to know that you will help us create a new, a unique future, the future to which God calls us.

As individuals, as a church, and as a nation, if we follow Joshua's example, we need to look backward to understand who we are and how far we have come. Then we need to move forward. As Jesus tells us, 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.

We have a lot to celebrate in this little church! We have faithfully served our Lord and this community for the past 160 years. We have created genuine community, a community where everyone is welcome. We have tried to help people deepen their relationship with God through Jesus. We have tried to take down barriers that separate us from our brothers and sisters of different faiths, to learn from those who walk a different spiritual path.

Please walk with us in the year to come in whatever ways you can. Together we can bring a message of empathy and compassion, of peace and love, of a deep and powerful healing to a world that desperately needs it!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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