

Introductory notes for the scripture reading: Joshua 1 1-9, Acts 18:9-10

Think of all the famous 2nd fiddles you have known. Tonto for the Lone Ranger, Ed McMahon for Johnny Carson, Prince Phillip for Queen Elizabeth. They spent their entire careers in a supporting role and were quite good at it. But when the lead retired – Johnny moved to California and the Lone Ranger took off his mask – usually these people are never heard from again; great 2nd fiddles do not necessarily make good first chairs.

Now consider Joshua. As a young slave coming out of Egypt with the Exodus, over a period of 40 years, he grew to become Moses' trusted assistant. And in that role he accomplished much: accompanying Moses up Mt Sinai, spying out the Promised Land, winning Israel's first conflict with a foreign king, but always with the knowledge that Moses was up there on the hill with his hands raised in divine blessing and support. Now Moses is gone and Joshua himself is around 80 – 85 years old, with 200,000 people looking for him to lead them in a military campaign to conquer their proposed homeland. Joshua, who has personally witnessed both the rebelliousness of his own people and also the strength of the land they are about to attack. Is it any wonder that God has to repeat three times His assurances that just as He had provided and protected Moses, now He would do the same for Joshua: *be strong and very courageous*. The future battles he would face would try every aspect of his leadership, but if he stayed close by Gods' side, he would emerge triumphant.

Read Josh 1:1-9

Now consider the Apostle Paul, called by God to take the Gospel into foreign lands, his first mission trip was a great success, but this second missionary journey is not going so well. He was mobbed, beaten, thrown in jail, and then escorted out of Philippi. He had to sneak out of the next two towns as enemies had followed him intentionally to stir up trouble wherever he went. Left alone in Athens, he was dismissed by the intelligentsia as just another religious curiosity. So now, when the Jews of Corinth once again begin threatening, I am sure that Paul is deeply questioning whether or not to continue doing mission work. That's when God speaks to him.

Read Acts 18:9-11

Sermon: Joshua, Strong and Courageous! Joshua 1 1-9, Acts 18:9-10

This message was adapted from "Never, Never, Never," by J.d. Tutell @ SermonCentral.Com

Last Sunday commemorated the 76th anniversary of VJ Day, the surrender of Japan, marking the official end of WW2. Yesterday marked the 20th anniversary of the bombing of the Pentagon and World Trade Center. This last January the Congress Building was attacked by domestic vigilante groups. While this summer national gas, electric, and manufacturing industries were shut down by ransom seeking hackers. It seems that terrorism both international and homegrown, in person or through the internet, is defining what may turn out to be a third world war. How do we live, perhaps even thrive in this violent and unpredictable future? By learning lessons from our past.

It was October 29th, 1941. Winston Churchill had been the Prime Minister for only a year. Within days of his taking office, their closest ally, France, had fallen to Germany. England had spent the time preparing for an anticipated invasion. But by the end of the year things had begun to turn. Germany had chosen to invade Russia, making a country that was once an enemy an ally. America had agreed to supply England with weapons and supplies. The times were still dark, defeat still loomed as a probable outcome, but there was at least a flicker of hope.

On this day Churchill had come to speak at the Harrow school, which he had attended as a teenager. The speech that he gave that day against a background of war and looming defeat is ranked as one of the greatest speeches in history. The center of the message were these words. "**Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never!**" These are words that we could all use these days as like Joshua and Paul we again face a fearful future. Whenever times are difficult, when things look dark and defeat seems to be a possibility, we must stand. But we can be confident that we do not stand alone. We are never to give up; never to give in because of who we serve and whose we are.

As we heard in today's scripture lesson, three times in their short conversation, God both encourages, even orders, Joshua to "*be strong and very courageous.*" This was a clear warning that Joshua would face very difficult times ahead, but with the knowledge that his future victories were assured because he would not face these battles alone.

For us today, both these stories of Joshua and Paul illustrate how God works in the world and how God wants to work in us. You see **God has a plan for the world, but also for each person who desires a relationship with Him. God desires to do His work in the world through His people.**

There is little doubt that our world is again in a state of crisis, both environmental and political, both mostly of our own making, but there is an even larger looming crisis which is spiritual. Some would say watching the news will show just how far the world

has gone in a wrong direction, but all you really need to do is go to the mall and people watch. Look and listen to the people you see there. There are a lot of lost and hurting people out there. Life without Christ is fearful. It is a time when imminent defeat is possible. More importantly, life without Jesus leads to eternity without Jesus. That is the sad state of the world today.

Of course the answer to our world's spiritual crisis and perhaps its environmental as well as political problems is for people to come to know God and live in a redeemed relationship with Him. **Just like the Covid vaccine, the more of the world's population that come to Christ, the better off we all will be.** And just like Paul, this task of bring Christ's message to the world has been left to us. In fact, just like Joshua we have both been ordered to do so and also assured that we will never work alone. But I fear that our familiarity with the Great Commission has somewhat deafened us to both the authority and urgency of the final command Jesus gave us.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything that
I have commanded you. And remember,
I am with you always, to the end of the age.'
Matthew 28: 19-20

God wants the entire world to come to know Him and His desire is to work through us to make that happen, but it is a challenge. Helping people to know Jesus and become His disciples isn't easy, but it is worthwhile. If you are a disciple of Jesus it is something you are expected do. So as we think about the challenges ahead of us, let us **consider three "nevers" inspired by Churchill's speech, the first being: never give in to problems.**

People have problems and so do we; when it comes to problems the world certainly doesn't lack in variety. For Israel, it started with the fact that these people needed to leave their past behind. Coming out of Egypt, the first generation of God's people spent most of their time grumbling or rebelling. When they were trapped against the Red Sea, they didn't look to God for a miracle, instead they blamed Moses, "*You've brought us out here to die,*" which was the same repeated complaint whenever they ran out of water or food, or the first time they were ordered to enter the Promised Land. Their attitude was so bad that God camped them out in the wilderness until that first generation had died off, so that the second generation might be given a chance.

Now a desert hardened generation, having forty years of experience with God's provision, were once again standing where their parents had stood. They certainly couldn't look to their past as inspiration for their future. But the good news is that God, not their history, would be the source of their future.

But think of the crisis they now faced as they stood on the borders of their Promised Land. They had just lost the leader who had carried them through all of that past. Moses had died. Moses had led the people from slavery to the point that they were about to be conquerors. It was a huge job, with troublesome people, but God did it through him. **Deuteronomy** declares, “

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. (34:10-12)

Wow, how would you like an epitaph like that? There would never again be a leader like Moses, Joshua could never replace him, but Joshua was now their leader.

The land was theirs for the taking because God was with them, but they had to let go of the past, they had to follow the next leader whom God had sent them and that leader had to have the courage to step forward and lead the people into taking land.

Those were personal obstacles which they had to overcome. But the land in front of them was also full of real obstacles and real enemies. It had large powerful cities with developed armies and defenses. In their 40 years of wandering through the desert, news of this migrating nation looking for a homeland certainly preceded them. Israel was about to face real enemies who had time to prepare for their arrival. These people were determined to fight and resist these people entering their lands.

The cause of Christ faces similar hostile and prepared enemies today. Many schools and work places now have rules against “proselytizing,” which is another word for sharing your faith: no visible displays of religion allowed, no gold crosses worn as jewelry, no logos printed on shirts. How we came here is a long story, but we now live in a “**post-Christian**” society that has become vaguely hostile towards Christians’ speaking about their faith. Slanted news stories and works of fiction have given people a generally negative impression of Christianity, as a narrow minded anti-progressive movement, who have nothing to offer a modern culture. You might say that they have been inoculated against Christianity, thus making it all that much harder for them to catch the faith.

This is a big problem for us. But our continuing mission remains to get people to move beyond these prejudices, to introduce them to who Christ really is, to teach them what the Bible really says. To introduce them to a life of faith not fear. It will be a daunting task. But here’s a bit of good news. Most people that you share your faith with won’t be holding a sword and won’t try to kill you. Unlike Joshua, more like Paul, we face a different type of warfare, a different type of struggle on a spiritual level. As Paul said

Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,
but against ... cosmic powers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual forces of evil
Ephesians 6:12

There are lost people living in spiritual darkness all around us. The most important decision some people will make this year will have nothing to do with whether or not get the Covid vaccine, or to return to the office, or to buy that new house or car, until they personally accept Christ as their savior, they are automatically rejecting Him and they are living a life that is doomed to fail.

But, just like Joshua, just like Paul, the spiritual battle we face is beyond our ability but it is not beyond God. We need to be on our knees praying for lost people and asking Him to give us opportunities to share and the courage and wisdom to take those opportunities when they come.

A common problem that many older Christians face, is that they don't know of anyone who is not a Christian. They say "*I don't have anyone to share with, or I would.*" The problem is that they are starting at the wrong point. Our job doesn't start with finding a person, it starts with asking God. If you ask Him to use you, He will use you. He is God, He was bigger than all of the obstacles and enemies Joshua and Paul had to face and He is bigger than all obstacles and enemies now.

If you seek God's leadership in prayer, if you are praying for those who don't know Him, if you are looking you will see Him moving. Bedford Presbyterian set up a prayer table this Summer as one way for God to lead those who are seeking, those who are needy to us and it is working. The table has been well received with many people asking for prayers. The prayer table will again be standing at Centerfest and in the Farmer's Market twice in October. Why don't you spend some time at the table and see who God brings in your direction. **Never give into the problems.** It's not about you, it's not about our culture, it is all about God and God is far bigger.

Our second "never" is never forget God's promises.

When we are facing obstacles, the thing that should keep us going, our source of personal strength are the promises of God. God didn't just tell Joshua to be strong and courageous, He gave Joshua some very basic promises. Promises that we can still cling to today because we serve the same God. What He could do then, He can certainly do today. Look at what God promises.

God promised that the Israelites would take the land; He told Joshua, "***I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.***" The promise was given to Moses, but it wasn't exclusive to Moses, it was for the people. When Moses passed the promise endured because God endures. The promise was that the people would take the land. That was their mission.

What is our mission. To impact our community for Christ. To fulfill the commission that He gave us; to go and make disciples. If we seek Him, if we follow Him, then we will

take the land, we will be used to make disciples. Look at what Jesus told his own disciples,

Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. John 4:35-36

For our Christian efforts, there is a promised harvest, a joy that comes with helping people to find forgiveness and hope for this life with eternal life in the next. God gives us a big task, but He promises us that we will take the land.

God also promised the Israelites victory, "**No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life.**" For Joshua, this was a promise of victory in battle. But this also applied to the internal struggles of the Israelites. No one would be able to stand against Joshua as he sought to lead the people to accomplish the mission that God had for him. In the same way we will face obstacles to sharing Christ. There are people who oppose the cause of Christ all around us. But God is bigger and when we stand in His strength He will give us the ability to overcome them in His name.

God promised them the land, He promised them victory and most importantly, God promised His continuing presence with them. He said, "**As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.**" What an awesome promise and it applies to you and me. What power in this world can be greater than the presence of God? There is nothing. No darkness can cover it, no obstacle can stop Him. He is God and He is with you and me. *If God is for us, who can be against us?*

When things seem bleak, when defeat seems imminent, isn't it good to know that we are not dependent on our enemy to make a mistake and invade another country, or for someone to send us weapons? Our victory depends on the God who is right next to us. He is greater than any darkness around you. When you stand with Christ, you will stand, victory will be yours, you will see the land that you were promised. Pray for those people around you who don't know Christ, you will see some of them find Him. But we have to be willing to fight for them and that battle begins on our knees in prayer.

So, never give in to the problems, never forget His promises and also never forget His precepts. God wants to work through you, but He also expects some things from you. He told Joshua "**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.**" Joshua 1:7

God gave Joshua promises, but He also told him there are some things that he had to do. There are things that we have to do if we want to claim these same blessings.

God has also given us a mission. To have an impact in our community. Jesus taught, "**let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven**" Matthew 5:16. If we want people to see God, then we need to be out in the public square serving Him. We need to find ways to show our neighbors who He is. It is an active role. It's not just going to church on Sunday, it is being the church every day, actively working in the middle of our community.

But as we learned last week, impure salt is not good for the task, immature, spiritually unarmed Christians will be defeated in the fight. Joshua was told to *meditate on [God's word] day and night* for it would make his way prosperous and his fights successful. The psalmist said that he hid God's word in his heart so that he might not sin against God. The young disciple Timothy was charged to

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

We have been called to put on the full armor of God in order to stand against the attacks of the Devil. Yes there are big challenges facing us in this world, but God has promised us victory and His presence. But in order to spiritually stand in this world, we must **never give in to the problems, never forget God's promises, and never forget His precepts**, The path to victory in this fallen world, is to walk through it with Jesus. If you've never committed to do that, then do it today. The battle is afoot and no one should be left on the losing side.