



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

## Tell the Children

SCRIPTURE:  
Joshua 4:1-6,  
21b-24

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Feb. 11, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Sarah Are Speed

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**G**ood morning, Village! It is such a joy to be with you all today. I have been looking forward to this Sunday for weeks! This church has shaped my family more than any other church, so it is a true honor to be invited here today. Thank you.

Normally on a Sunday morning you will find me at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, where I serve as an associate pastor. Most weeks I am in the chancel, but a few weeks ago we were short staffed in the children’s wing, so I volunteered to lead children’s church for the morning. I thought to myself: I have a seminary degree! I’m an adult! They’re handing me a curriculum to follow. It’s just a bunch of kids. I’ve got this! Famous last words, right?

By the time I got down to the children’s wing that morning, it appeared that the children had been able to consume nothing but sugar doughnuts for the last 24 hours. That is how enthusiastic they were. They were running laps around the room. You would have thought that there was an emergency, or a sporting event taking place, they were moving so fast.

So I scurried into the middle of this joyful mayhem, sat down on the floor and invited them to gather around for story time. And using the wooden props that were in the children’s room I depicted the Bible story for the day right there in the middle of the circle.

After telling the story, the curriculum suggested that we ask questions about the text, and at the moment, I thought that was a good idea! I thought, “Yes, this will invite the children to participate!” I should have thought longer about it. We were supposed to ask “I wonder” questions, like, “I wonder... did Noah like being with all those animals?” “I wonder... did Noah ever get bored on the ark?” You get the point.

Instead, the questions took on a life of their own. One kid yelled from the back, “Were there ants on

the ark?” And then another kid said, “Do you think ants like doughnuts?” That got a lot of laughs. And then a precocious 7-year-old in the front, “Do ants get married?” Which was followed by a cheer of “Why do humans get married?” And in approximately 2.5 seconds we had traveled from “Were there ants on the ark?” to “How are babies made?” And I thought to myself “Oh, I don’t got it.”

Children can ask a lot of questions. Sometimes, like that Sunday in children’s church, those questions can throw us for a curveball. But sometimes, kids ask us questions about our faith, questions like: “What do you think God looks like?” Or, “Do dogs go to heaven?” Or, “Do you think God knows my name?” And in those moments, you can’t find holier ground to stand on.

And I think Joshua, the leader in our story for today, knew that. I think Joshua knew that kids would ask questions—that the future would have questions. And I think Joshua knew their questions would lead us to holy ground, but let’s take a look.

Our scripture today is Joshua chapter 4, which tells us the story of the Israelites crossing into the promised land. For 40 years Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness. They wandered in the desert. They lived off of manna and quail, searching for that ever-evasive promised land. And after 40 years, Moses passed away, so God tapped Joshua to take his place. And in the portion we read today, it’s Joshua who finally leads the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the promised land. And the story of how this happens is actually quite beautiful.

According to the text, the Israelites made it to the banks of the Jordan River a few days before they crossed into the promised land. And when they arrive, they prepare for the crossing. They sanctify themselves and Joshua gathers the people to listen to the word of God before they finish their journey.

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This is how I know Joshua was a Presbyterian. Instead of a free-for-all sprint into the promised land, which is what I would have voted for after 40 years of wandering, Joshua organizes the people so that they can enter in an orderly and decent fashion. God bless him.

On the day of the actual crossing, the priests waded into the Jordan River first. The priests were supposed to lead the way, carrying the ark of the covenant on their shoulders. When the priests stepped into the river to begin the journey, the water stopped. Now this is not an insignificant moment, because in the chapter prior to what we read today, we learn that the Jordan River was in the flood season. The waters would have been high. They would have been choppy. The Jordan River was swollen throughout the harvest season, which would have made it very hard for an entire nation to cross the waters safely. But when the priests step into the flow, when they get their feet wet, the text tells us that the water from upstream stopped flowing. Scripture literally describes it by saying, “the water piled up in a heap a great distance away.”

So for the second time in history, God parted the waters and the Israelites walked on dry land. Can you imagine it? I am sure it was a holy moment.

When the entire nation finally gets to the other side, the first thing Joshua does is to build a monument. Joshua sends 12 men from the 12 different tribes back into that dry river bed with instructions to find a stone and to roll it out onto the bank of the shore so that the people can build a monument.

I’m sure some thought that Joshua was crazy. I’m sure some thought Joshua was getting sentimental, or that he simply wanted to build some sort of marker to claim the land as their own, but that wasn’t it. No, Joshua said, get 12 stones from the river because children ask questions.

Joshua knew that one day the children would ask, the future would ask, “Why are these stones here?” And Joshua said, “When they do, it will be a holy moment because you can tell them about this day.” Joshua said: Tell the children about the God who walked with you in the wilderness. Tell the children about the God who liberated you from slavery. Tell the children about the God who parted the sea and the river. Tell them about the God who provided

manna in the wilderness. Tell them about the God who loves them and calls them by name.

That’s why they gathered the stones. It was the first thing they did in the promised land because Joshua knew that the children would ask—the future would ask. And when they did, he said, make sure you tell them this story. I think Joshua was on to something, don’t you?

When I was a college student I began to discern a call to ministry. I wrote a letter to every single Presbyterian Church in the zip code begging someone to hire me. And by the grace of God, someone did. I got a job working at a small Presbyterian church in town with a warm and friendly congregation. At the time I was hired, the church did not have a youth group, so I asked the pastor if I could start one, and with the church’s blessing, I began gathering the teenagers that were there each Sunday.

It was not long after I arrived that one of those students, we’ll call her Kate, ended up in the hospital. Kate had made a suicide attempt, which thanks be to God, had failed. And it was there in the hospital, as she was waking up in the recovery wing, that Kate confessed to her mom that she had been the victim of bullying and abuse.

Kate ended up in a long-term treatment program—a therapy center that could help her unpack her trauma and heal. And despite that this was a good thing for her, Kate was young. And she was far from home. And she was scared.

So a few members of the church gathered together and decided that they would write Kate a letter for every day that she was away. They called themselves her “care team.” And Kate’s team care team included people like her elementary Sunday school teacher and her confirmation mentor. It included Mr. Franklin, who sat in the pew behind Kate’s family her entire life, as well as Bonnie and Sylvia, who sang in the choir and always bought Girl Scout cookies from Kate. And together, those adults created a schedule of handwritten letters.

And while I never read them, Kate shared with me that in those letters, they told her their stories. They told her that she was not alone. They told her about the wilderness seasons of their own lives. They told her about the God that they believed in, a God of radical love, mercy and justice. They told her about

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all times when the church had been there for them, and that God was never going to give up on her, nor would they. They told her about the wilderness and they told her about love. And like stones by the river, Kate stacked those letters by her bedside and she read them every day.

After Kate got discharged, she shared with me that there were days and weeks at the beginning of her treatment where she was convinced that she would never feel good again, that the scars would be the first thing that she saw, that the trauma would always be the first thing on her mind, and that she would always be asking, “Where is God in all of this?” “But the church,” she laughed, “they just wouldn’t stop writing me letters.”

Friends, I think Joshua gathered stones by the river because he knew that the future might one day ask, “Where is God in all of this?” And when that day came, Joshua wanted the future faithful to be able to point to the stones by the river and tell their children about that day.

This amazes me because Joshua anticipated a need that was not present in the current moment. Joshua anticipated that—despite the joy and the hope of their current moment, despite the ecstasy of the Israelites finally making it to the promised land—some future version of them may need to borrow from the faith of their present day in order to get by. Joshua anticipated that the future may need to hear the story of crossing the river on dry ground—the story of a God who was with them in the wilderness. And possibly because of that, Joshua stacked stones. He did it because he knew that the future might ask, “Where is God in all of this?” and when those questions came, he said: Tell them stories of this day. Church, we could learn something from Joshua because I think the future is going to have those same questions for us.

Village, for 75 years now you have been an amazing church. You have been faithful and creative, bold and hopeful. For 75 years now, people like me have looked to you to understand what it means to be the church. On Tuesday night, you will celebrate this milestone of faithful living. And then on Wednesday,

you will begin again, reaching for 75 more.

And while I am confident that the next 75 years will be beautiful and holy, I am also aware that the future is not going to come easy. The future will have its own set of questions. For as long as we live in a world that is obsessed with dropping bombs and building walls, as long as we live in a world where teenagers need long-term treatment programs and kids are forced to grow up too fast, then people will be asking, “Where is God in all of this?”

And when those questions come, I hope you can take a page from Joshua’s playbook. Tell the children about your faith. Tell the world about this community that has changed your life. Tell them stories of this church. Tell them about the buses that you filled that went to New Orleans after Katrina. Tell them about the Sunday when the inclusion of the LGBTQ community was first preached in this pulpit and you all broke into applause. Tell them about the free health clinic, the Clothes Closet, and the funerals where people have stood in this room and insisted that love is stronger than death. Tell them that there’s an associate pastor in New York City who learned what it feels like to belong because of you all. Tell them what you believe about God.

Now I’m not asking you to go stand on the street corner and yell at people about your faith. That’s never really proven to be productive. But what I am asking, encouraging and hoping, is that like Kate’s care team and Joshua at the edge of the river, that you will be willing to tell people where you’ve seen God in this world if they ask. Because I think the future is going to ask.

So for the sake of the next 75 beautiful years, may we be brave like Joshua. May we write letters about God, community and belonging. May we stack them by our bedside like stones. And may we not be afraid to speak about the God that we know now. Because if we can do that, then in 75 years, this little corner of Mission Road is going to feel even closer to the promised land than it already does. With God’s help, may it be so.

Friends, join me in prayer. We believe. Help our unbelief. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.