



Be Courageous

TEXT
Joshua 1:1-9

July 5, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

God speaks to Joshua and three times God says, “Be strong and courageous.” Joshua is called to lead God’s people into the Promised Land. He will need courage because battles await. He will need courage because Moses has died. But I think this thrice spoken exhortation to courage is not because of battle or position, but because God has called them to be a people shaped by the word of God.

Before Moses died, he gave a long sermon — it’s our book of Deuteronomy — telling God’s children how they were to live once they came into the Promised Land. It was not enough to possess the land. That was never the point. It was not enough to live in the land. They were to live in the land as a people possessed by the word of God. They were to meditate on it day and night, letting the words become so engrained in them that it shaped their way of life. God says, “This is the kind of nation you are to be.” If I understand the text, that’s the reason God’s children will need courage. Joshua led them into the land.

In time, they settled down, began to build their villages, plant their crops, raise their

sheep, raise their children. And life seemed normal. Over time, they began to assume that the way things were was what God wanted. They forgot that it wasn’t enough to be in the land; it was how they were to live in the land that mattered. They assumed that the way things were was good enough; they had reached the goal.

But then, in a variety of ways — sometimes through the voices of prophets, sometimes through the voices from the powerless fringes, sometimes through crisis — God reminds her people that “you are not home yet.” The way things are may seem normal, but we have normalized the wrong things.

Go back and meditate on the word of God again until you see what you haven’t seen before. And with great courage, they would change, drawing closer to who they were called to be. It’s a pattern that has repeated itself over and over, and I think continues even now. It’s a good thing. It’s a God thing, but it requires courage.

This week, with fewer fireworks and parades, we marked a quieter celebration of Independence Day. And maybe we have been granted a time to reflect anew on who we want to be in

the land. We are seeing some things that are hard to look at. Some things we have assumed were normal, we have to rethink.

July Fourth falls just a few weeks after Juneteenth, an independence day of its own. If you didn’t know already, Juneteenth is recognized on June 19 to mark the day in 1865 when word of emancipation finally reached the last enslaved people in Galveston, Texas. Like those who marched with Joshua into the Promised Land, on that liberation day in 1865, they no doubt assumed, “We are free now.” But freedom granted to former slaves was soon met with hostile backlash. Slavery was quickly followed by Jim Crow and the midnight rides of the Klan.

Some rightly point out, that was then. That’s not now. And yet even today, bold voices of white power or white supremacy come from every corner of American life, including government and Christian churches.

But it’s more complicated than that. Dr. Michelle Alexander asserts that the Jim Crow practice of today is mass incarceration, influenced by drug policy. Even though drug use among white communities exists in similar percentages as black communities, the enforcement in black

communities far exceeds punishment in white communities. Why is that?

The United States now has the largest prison population in the world. And paying your debt to society often never ends. Dr. Alexander continues, “Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination — employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service — are suddenly legal.”¹ Even out of prison, the punishment continues.

This is what we have normalized, but is this really who we want to be? Does there come a time when punishment should be equitable and also eventually come to an end?

This quieter Independence Day in 2020, we are reflecting again who we want to be in this land of freedom. For me, and for you as well, this conversation is shaped by faith. The Lordship of Jesus Christ shapes everything in our lives.

Sometimes it’s crisis, sometimes the voice of prophets, sometimes the unexpected voice from the powerless fringes that pushes us back to this holy word that makes us new. It is a good thing, and it is a God thing, but it takes courage.

In 1987 in Philadelphia, there was a bicentennial celebration of the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. On that bright September day, Chief Justice Warren Burger waxed nostalgic. He said, “If we remain on course, keeping faith

with the vision of the founders ... we will have done our part to see that the great new idea of government ... by we the people ... remains in place.” The primary work today, Burger said, was to keep faith with the vision the founders had in 1787.

A few months prior, Thurgood Marshall offered an alternative voice. Marshall became known to many when he argued *Brown v. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court in 1954. He was later to become the first African American to sit on the highest court in the land.

But when Marshall looked back to the vision of the founders, he looked into the eyes of men who failed to see him as a human being. Marshall was, according to them, only three-fifths of a person. Marshall advised the country to be wary of what he called the “flagwaving fervor” surrounding the bicentennial. “The focus of this celebration,” he said, “invites a complacent belief that the vision of those who debated and compromised in Philadelphia yielded the ‘more perfect Union’ it is said we now enjoy.”

Marshall added: “I cannot accept this invitation.” The government the Framers devised, he explained, “was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation” to better realize the promise of a more just society. Credit for the Constitution in its present meaning belonged not to the Framers, Marshall concluded, but “to those who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of

‘liberty,’ ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ and who strived to better them.”²

Marshall believed in America because he trusted America is still becoming. This seems essentially theological to me. This seems holy to me.

As people of faith, we know it is not enough for us to possess the land; we are to live in this land as a people possessed by the Word of God. Toward that end, as people of faith, we are always needing to rethink that which is outdated in our notions of liberty, justice and equality, and we must strive to better them.

The history of faith shows us this. Sometimes it was prophets, or voices from the powerless fringes or even crisis that pushed the children of God to reimagine their way to a new day. It seems to me, we are in just such a time. It’s a good thing and it’s a God thing, but it takes courage.

But with courage and humility, we can imagine a better day.

¹Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (2010), p. 2

²Michael Graetz and Linda Greenhouse, *The Burger Court and the Rise of the Judicial Right* (2016), pp. 2–3

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.