

Sermon (11/5/17, Joshua 3: 7-17):

I have a cartoon on my office door showing two men carrying a sofa. In the background there are two devil types dressed in red and holding pitchforks. One of the guys carrying the sofa says to the other, 'Yup, this is hell. We spend the rest of eternity moving from one house to the next.'

Anyone who has ever moved, especially after living in the same place for numerous years, can relate to this cartoon. Moving is hell. I have yet to meet someone who enjoys it. It's just no fun sorting through years upon years of squirreled away stuff and packing box after box until you see them in your nightmares.

Some say that the two highest stressors we face in life are the death of a loved one and moving. I believe it. Moving, for one, is tough and I'm not even talking about the move itself. Moving often means leaving behind everything that's familiar including your friends, loved ones, and a host of other things. Moving into a new place often comes with the anxiety of not knowing anyone or anything about the new area you're in. It's very disorienting, stressful, and upsetting.

Losing a loved one through death has some similarities. To lose a beloved one turns our entire lives upside down. At first, the loss is so great it feels surreal. As we slowly come to terms with it, we realize that everything is suddenly unfamiliar. Who am I without this person? Can I survive on my own? Will I be okay? Not only is the grief of their loss great but so too is the fear we feel about the future.

In today's story from Joshua, the Hebrew people are suffering the stress of both these types of losses. Their leader, Moses, is now dead. The one they relied on to get them through the desert is gone. The one who knew God face to face and constantly advocated for them; the one they turned to in times of crisis is no more. Who will lead them? Who will advocate for them? Is there anyone who could even come close to replacing Moses? Will God desert them too?

Joshua was the handpicked successor of Moses but doubts about his ability to replace Moses abounded. Fear and grief defined the place the Hebrew people were in. They had finally reached the threshold of the land that God had long promised but it did not feel like good news. They were

about to ‘move into’ a new, unfamiliar, strange land and they would have to do so without the sure and certain companionship of their beloved Moses.

The pressure on Joshua was enormous. Talk about trying to fill big shoes or, in this case, sandals! Every eye was upon him, filled with skepticism and doubt. He had probably become the lightning rod of everyone’s anxiety.

“This day,” God announces to Joshua, “I will begin to exalt you in the sight of Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.”

Those words had to be music to Joshua’s ears. What happens next is the exact prescription the Hebrew people needed to begin the healing process.

Following God’s instructions, Joshua told each of the twelve tribes to select one priest to carry the Ark of the Covenant. As you might remember, the Ark contained the tablets with the law imprinted on them, Aaron’s staff, and a sample of Manna. Most importantly, the Ark represented the seat upon which God sat to be present among his people. The big question was whether God was still on that seat.

Joshua’s instructions continue. As the Ark was carried through the camp by these twelve priests, everyone was to follow behind. When the soles of the feet of the priests stepped into the river Jordan, the waters would part, and the people would cross over on dry land.

The text makes clear that because of the season they were in, the Jordan was overflowing its banks. The winter snows in the mountains had melted and the river was not only high but probably over a mile wide. The current was also probably strong, especially in the area where they were crossing. There was no way the Hebrew people could make it across without God’s help. Would the waters recognize the presence of God in the Ark? Would they bow down and worship? Would the priests safely cross over or be violently washed away?

With their collective breath held, the priests carrying the ark wade into the river. Immediately the rushing waters part, forming a dry stretch of land for the people to cross over.

We can't help but to sense the intentionality of how this moment is reminiscent of Moses parting the Red Sea to save the Hebrew people from the Egyptian army. The God of Moses is surely now with Joshua. This is a sure and certain sign that the God who walked with them under Moses' leadership had not deserted them. All would be well. Life would go on. Hope was alive.

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember, reminisce, and give thanks. In so doing, we also can't help but to feel again the sting of loss. The loss of friendships, of loved ones, of places, of dreams, of what once was. It hurts. It causes tears. We mourn and, to be frank, it's okay.

It has long been my contention that, culturally, we do a very poor job at grieving. Too often we are left with the impression that after a few days we should be up and about as if nothing happened. Grief doesn't have a time table, though. Grieving can't be overcome by swallowing hard and pretending it's not there. There is only one way of dealing with grief and that is by walking through it. So please keep this in mind when considering what I am going to say next.

Eventually, as part of grieving well, there does come a time when we need to break camp, back up our things, and move forward. The hope and assurance the Hebrew people longed for and found, only came by way of their courageous willingness to do what Joshua instructed. They picked a priest from every tribe, they placed the Ark on their shoulders, they fell in line behind the Ark as it made its way through camp, the priests bravely stepped into the turbulent, life threatening Jordan, and, lo and behold, the waters bowed down and worshiped. Hope returned just as it did for the Apostles on Easter morn!

As much as we might long for it. As much as our souls might ache to return to what was, we can't. Eventually, we must bravely step forward into the mysterious, even frightening unknown. It's what those whom we love and miss would want us to do. It's what God wants us to do. It is the means by which God assures us that God is with us still.

This is no less true when it comes to the church. Many of us remember those days when pews were filled people and a Christian Education Building was needed because there were so many children to

teach. We wonder where those days went as we look back with nostalgic longing, mourning the loss of what once was.

Even in our grief, however, there comes a moment, like it did for the Hebrew people, when we need to pack our things and step out in trust. Today's challenges can't be solved by simply recreating the church of our childhood. The place we are in today is as different, as mysterious and as unknown as the Promised Land the Hebrew people were entering. There is only one way to live again, though, and that is to step forward, courageously dipping our feet into the raging waters of today's turbulent society. And when we do, maybe, just maybe, we too will find our faith restored as we watch even the wild waters of today worship and bow down, making a dry and safe path for us to cross over into a new beginning.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.