

Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015

**“Looking for Joshua”**

**Deuteronomy 31: 1-8**

*The Reverend Harry J. Bradley, Interim Moderator*

Wasn't last Sunday quite the celebration?  
Many of us gathered here at St. Timothy's  
to join with the Reverend Dennis Cook,  
his wife, Eileen, and members of his family  
to remember with thanksgiving  
the thirteen and one-half years  
of his pastoral ministry among this congregation  
and in the Ajax community.  
Dennis, Eileen and their family  
have journeyed with this congregation  
over these many years.  
For some, Mr. Cook is the only minister  
they've known their whole time  
of being part of this people at St. Timothy's.  
Of course, many woke up on Monday morning  
with a new questions to ponder:  
“Where to now?”  
“Who will lead and guide our congregation  
into their future?”

In many ways, the reading this morning  
from the Hebrew book, *Deuteronomy*,  
captures where, as a congregation,  
we now find ourselves.  
*Deuteronomy*,  
literally meaning the second giving  
of the Law of Moses,  
is a retelling of the wilderness wanderings  
of the people of Israel  
under the leadership of Moses.  
It is also a book that deals with a time of transition.  
In our text this morning,  
we stand with the people of Israel  
on the banks of the Jordan.  
Behind them is the wilderness  
where they have wandered for the past forty years.  
Under Moses' leadership,  
the people of Israel have wandered  
for four decades through the wilderness.  
It's been a time of high mountaintops  
and low valleys.  
There have been moments of successes  
and setbacks.  
Along the way,  
with the help of Moses leading them,  
the people of Israel  
experienced high moments of joy,  
such as crossing the Red Sea

and escaping Pharaoh's army.  
They praised God  
who was clearly leading them  
to a promised land “flowing with milk and honey.”  
The next day the people grumbled  
and complained to Moses accusing him  
of leading them around in circles.  
During these forty years of journeying together,  
with God's leading and Moses' help,  
this rag-tag gaggle of people who fled Egypt  
slowly were being shaped into a people  
who would become a great nation.

Now, after years of waiting to arrive,  
before them is the land God promised to them,  
and to their ancestors.  
They, along with Moses, stand and gaze  
at their future, the **“promised land.”**  
When they cross the river they will be entering  
a land of new beginnings.  
Like most “futures,”  
there will be much that they will be new to them.  
Yet, over the years together,  
people have begun to trust teach other,  
relying on those who have journeyed with them.  
They are ready to enter and possess the land  
with the excitement of a new adventure of faith.

It is at this moment when their faithful leader, Moses,  
throws a curve into their anticipated plans.  
After he has reminded the people of the Law  
and the way of life God had given  
to the Israelite community,  
Moses, in effect, gives his retirement notice:  
**“When Moses had finished speaking  
all these words to all of Israel,  
he said to them:  
‘I am now one hundred twenty years old.  
I am no longer able to get about  
and the Lord has told me  
“You shall not cross over the Jordan.”’”**

I imagine that many of the people at that moment  
understood what many of you may be feeling today.  
Some had grown up knowing only Moses  
as their pastor and their leader.  
Others had come to appreciate his leadership  
as well as his pastoral gifts of caring for them

as they journeyed through the desert of life.  
Undoubtedly, some were shocked  
and others were stunned into disbelief  
at this announcement by Moses that he had  
come as far as he could  
but could not go further with them.

For Moses, too, it must have been a hard moment.  
After all, he had gathered these people  
in the midst of their struggles.  
Moses had been faithful to his call from God,  
leading the people through some very difficult times  
and leading them to a brighter future.  
Now, after ministering to these people  
for much of his ministry,  
together they had reached  
the moment when they were about  
to cross over into a new, long-awaited future;  
a promise of God fulfilled.  
Surely, after years of patiently working  
toward this goal,  
Moses ought to be one of the one to lead them as they  
enter this “promised land” full of abundance.

But it was not to be so.  
God spoke to his faithful servant, Moses,  
and said that it was not to be.  
Moses had be faithful and diligent  
in leading his people to this moment  
but he was not to take them any further.  
God knew that for this next part of the journey,  
Israel would need a new leader,  
someone with a reverence for the people’s past  
but with new gifts and enthusiasm  
to lead this band of believers  
into the next chapter of their life together.  
Consequently, the final act of Moses  
is to let go of his reins as the leader of Israel.  
A new leader, Joshua, is to take them  
across the Jordan river  
and into the next chapter  
of their congregational story.

What is critically important  
in this transitional moment  
is that the people’s need to be reminded  
that God is very much involved in their story.  
Time and time again,  
Moses is quick to tell the people  
that he and any other leader, like Joshua,  
have a role in Israel’s story  
but it is not merely their efforts  
that will bring any success.  
**“Be strong and be bold;  
have no fear or dread...”**

***because it is the LORD your God  
who goes with you;  
[God] will not fail you or forsake you [31:6]***

Later, addressing Joshua before the people,  
Moses reaffirms that he goes with God  
as the One who calls them forward  
into this new chapter of their story:  
***“Be strong and be bold;  
for you are the one who will go with this people  
into the land that the LORD has sworn  
to their ancestors to give them;...  
It is the LORD who goes before you.  
He will be with you; he will not fail you  
or forsake you.  
Do not fear or be dismayed.” [31:7f.]***

Patrick Miller, Professor of Old Testament  
at Princeton Theological Seminary comments,  
***“The community is first given divine  
assurance that they will not be abandoned  
and that the Lord will go with them. ...The  
guidance and the sustenance the people have  
received has its source in the Lord. The first  
word is not an appointment of a new leader  
but the Lord’s own assurance....God will be  
there with you and will deliver you. Without  
the power of God at work, the question of a  
new human leader is moot—”***

We begin our search for “Joshua” today.  
Still, this seeking does not begin with either  
looking for another Dennis Cook  
nor is it merely trying to find someone  
who will fulfil our own personal expectations.  
We begin by reaffirming our trust and faith  
in God’s care and leading.  
As Professor Miller reminds us,  
***“Overcoming anxiety and fear is found first  
in the realization of the Lord’s powerful  
presence with the people. Where the sense of  
the presence of God in the ongoing life of the  
people is real, fear about ‘what will happen  
to us’ can be set aside...Do not be afraid;  
the Lord goes with you.”***

And so we stand on one side of the Jordan.  
Our future lies before us.  
Our first step in seeking Joshua is not up to us  
to find our next leader alone.  
The God who has brought us to this moment  
is the same God who will be a vital part  
of our next chapter  
on the journey to the “promised land.”