

“The Encouraging Word”
March 14, 2021

Joshua 1:1-9
Luke 5:1-6

I’ve mentioned before that several centuries ago, when Lent was observed with more fasting and penitence than it is today, this fourth Sunday of Lent was referred to as “Refreshment Sunday.” It was a little celebration in the midst of the strictures of the season. It was a day on which the Lenten disciplines would be relaxed, a time when apprentices who lived far from home would return to visit with their families.

I like the idea of Refreshment Sunday. I think that all us can use a day like that, even if Lent is no longer marked by the rigor with which it was once observed by some. We can use a time to let up on ourselves, to turn our hearts and our lives once more toward the God of encouragement.

Paul gives God that delightful title in his Letter to the Romans: “the God of encouragement.” That is the God we know in Jesus Christ—not someone ready to point out our shortcomings. The God of encouragement. Living in the presence of such a God, we can share that gift with others.

A prayer that is attributed to St. Augustine begins by telling God: “There are many days when the burdens we carry are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down, when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening, when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage.”

“There are many days...”

There has been a whole year’s worth of such days.

Last year on Sunday, March 8, I said during the announcements: “As you know, the latest uncertainty in these uncertain times is the Coronavirus and it’s spread in the United States. The Council discussed this at its meeting last week. I’ve been in touch with many of the physicians in our congregation and right now, we simply want to be prepared as best we can if conditions get worse. So for a while, as this morning, we will discourage shaking hands during the time of greeting and downstairs with greeters beforehand and with me after worship. It’s a rapidly changing situation and we’ll keep up to date and keep you up to date as well.”

It seemed as though that would pretty much handle things.

A year ago, we cancelled worship for March 15 and we’ve been a virtual, yet also a *very real*, congregation ever since. Together we have encouraged one another and supported our community, responding to the unexpected with generosity and compassion.

If we are honest, however, we will admit that we have been discouraged as well. We have despaired. Because political, social, and economic upheaval have been added to pandemic,

we've wondered about how we will get through all of this.

The warmer weather of March, the longer hours of evening light bring some lightness to my own heart—and maybe yours as well.

The new CDC guidelines and the President's speech last Thursday give some encouragement in these days. We can envision a return to normal that brings with it those good things we have missed: gathering with those whom we love, eating together, traveling, going to school, enjoying sports.

We also know that the “new, new normal” will contain elements of the “old normal” that are always with us: people we love will still get ill and die, there will still be problems at work, trouble at school, and difficulties when we do get together with family.

Somewhat like Joshua at the Jordan, we stand looking out toward new possibilities, aware that we have been brought through to this time and this place by the grace of God. And also aware of the courage that we will need to move forward.

Joshua, the assistant of Moses, chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people into the Promised Land after Moses died, Joshua looks out across the River Jordan and hears the word of God: “I will not fail or forsake you. Be strong and courageous.”

That's what we long to hear in these days, isn't it?

And yet, those words seem difficult to accept.

We don't know what is going through Joshua's mind, but we are told that God quickly says once more: “Be strong and courageous.”

You'd think that would be enough. But we are all too familiar in new or challenging situations—such as those we find ourselves in now—we are too familiar with all that would stop us from being both strong *and* courageous.

Then, as if Joshua is not listening or not hearing or not accepting this word, God concludes: “I hereby *command* you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

We can be slow to hear and receive all that the God of encouragement offers to us.

The witness of scripture, however, is that such gifts are there for the taking.

I started looking for stories of Jesus offering encouragement and quickly became overwhelmed. Skim through the Gospels and you'll find all sorts of occasions when Jesus spoke words of encouragement to worn out, despairing, *discouraged* people.

For just one example, look again at what's happening in that boat.

Peter and his companions have been fishing through the night. Remember, this is their profession—so they know what they're doing. They have the skill, the experience.

But as the morning comes, they have no fish.

Standing among the empty nets, standing in the middle of all this failure is Jesus.

He does not say, "Tough luck."

He does not say, "Gee, you must feel bad, but cheer up, God loves you."

He doesn't even say, "Shape up, get with the program, and don't screw up again."

No. This is what Jesus says to Peter: "Try once more." Go—contrary to all you might *feel* about your ability to meet the challenge that you are facing. Go—contrary to all that your mind tells you about your prospects for success. Go—contrary to the fear of failure that haunts you.

The word of the God of encouragement is spoken in the midst of life as we actually know it.

I once saw a bumper sticker that read: "Kids Need Encouragement Every Day."

It's true, isn't it? Whether you're a parent, a grandparent, a teacher—or just someone who encounters kids in various places, you know that kids need the special boost that a kind word, a word of support can give.

Kids need encouragement every day.

And you know as well that adults need encouragement every day, too. You do. I do. All of us. We want to know that others stand with us and share the sense that "you can do it." We want to know that those close to us see something positive in what we're doing.

Can we, in these Lenten days, let go of the despair and fear and discouragement that has become part of our lives in the past year so that we might both receive and share the encouragement of God.

What a great gift to share with someone else—to see in the other person someone who is doing their best, often in difficult and trying circumstances, and to support them in what they're doing. Think about it: the people who mean the most to you are probably the ones who said to you, "You're going to make it. You're going to get through this. And even if the difficulty continues, I'll be here with you."

Who is waiting to hear that from you today, this week?

The prayer attributed to St. Augustine that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon concludes by asking God: Flood the path with light; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us a sense of community with the saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of

those who journey with us on the road of life, to your honor and glory.

And that's it, isn't it? We seek the light, promise, bravery, community, and lively spirits that God makes possible so that in turn *we might encourage others*, because the journey is difficult at times.

This past year has been filled with difficulty and we have known those time when the road seemed dreary and endless.

Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged us in such times: "When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows."

The year ahead will have its own challenges. Let us open our hands and our hearts so that we can continue as we have to be there for each other and for the larger world, in ways large and small, in ways seen and unseen.

And just in case it has not yet registered in your heart, hear once more God's word to Joshua, to each one of us, and to you: "I will not fail or forsake you Be strong and courageous."