

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 27, 2022

## **Moving On**

Joshua 5:9-12

Last Sunday's special meeting to discuss adjustments in our church's COVID policies was a sign that we're anticipating further relief from the hardships and challenges of the past two years. We're certainly not completely in the clear, and as others have emphasized, COVID will likely always be with us in some form or another. But at the same time, we've come a long way. We've experienced God's faithfulness, guidance, and provision in our journey as a congregation. And now, in some respects, it feels like we're starting to cross over from the pandemic wilderness into a better place.

Crossing over has always been part of the story of God's people. We hear of it again in today's text from Joshua. This moment in Israel's journey is a small piece of a much larger story. For many, the most memorable part of the story told in the book of Joshua is the fall of Jericho, as the Israelites advance further into the land of Canaan. "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," a well-known African-American spiritual, captures what lots of people recall about this part of the Bible: "And the walls came tumblin' down."

But there's a lot that happened before, and after, the walls came tumblin' down. Recall that God had called Moses and promised to bring the people out of slavery in Egypt and "into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8). After their deliverance, the Israelites wandered for years in the wilderness. Eventually their leader Moses died, with the promised land in sight. A new era began as God commissioned Joshua as Moses' successor. Joshua is to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River. Joshua fulfills this assignment, and then instructs the people in setting up a memorial to the experience. This memorial will prompt future generations to ask about its significance and open the door to conversation about how the Lord dried up the waters of the river and brought his people across. Joshua even draws connections between the river crossing and the earlier crossing of the Red Sea as the people fled from Egypt. Both of these events will display the Lord's power to all the peoples of the earth, and will remind Israel to revere him.

Remember that this isn't the first generation of Israelites. Most of them died in the wilderness. The people who crossed the Jordan were their descendants. All the males who had come out of Egypt had been circumcised, but not those who had been born while the people were in the wilderness. So after the people had passed safely to the other side of the river and established a camp, Joshua led in the ritual of circumcision. Through this act, the Israelites showed their reverence to God and embodied, in their own flesh, the covenant that God had made with Abraham.

That brings us to today's text, where the Lord says to Joshua, "Today, I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (v. 9). Or as another translation renders it, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt" (NRSV). God's announcement signals that this is a new time in a new place. Things are different now. Yes, these are the people of God. That's who they've been, and who they still are. The Lord hasn't changed, and neither has his covenant. He is still their God, and they, despite all their disobedience, are still his people. But now the Lord has released them from the disgrace of Egypt. In other words,

the shame associated with their bondage, servitude, indebtedness, and impoverishment. God has now removed all that. As one commentator has put it, "No longer are they runaway slaves, defined by their subservience to the Egyptians. Now they are God's people, claimed by grace."<sup>1</sup>

It's only right, then, that the first place the people occupy in the new land have a name that reflects the liberating God who rescued them, brought them through the wilderness, and led them across the Jordan. The people will call this place *Gilgal*, a name that recalls the Hebrew verb "to roll" (*galal*). God has taken that part of their past and rolled it away.

But that doesn't mean the past is to be completely forgotten. In fact, after a period of healing following the ritual of circumcision, the Israelites organize a Passover celebration, in keeping with what God had commanded them (Exod. 12:25). As much as they look forward to the future God has promised, they never stop looking back to their deliverance from Egyptian oppression. For God's people, anticipation of what he will do is always grounded in remembrance of what he has done. Hope is joined to memory. The future has its roots in the past.

The life of God's people, whether in the story of Israel or in the life of the church, is always a matter of moving forward into the fullness of God's promises. And as we move forward into what God has promised in Christ, we regularly look back. Like the Israelites setting up their twelve-stone memorial after crossing the Jordan, we ourselves set up reminders, in various forms, to help us recall the commitments we have made to God and to one another.

In the church where I grew up, there was a large framed copy of a document called "The Church Covenant" hanging on the wall just above the piano. It began: "Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ." From there, the covenant went on to spell out our mutual commitments and obligations on a range of topics: church, money, family, alcohol, prayer, gossip, and most of all, love for one another. Because of the covenant's size, it was hard to sit in the sanctuary of that little country church and not see it, unless you had gotten used to it, which is always a danger.

I came across an experience from one person whose church had built a new sanctuary and had converted the old one into a fellowship hall. But they didn't move the church covenant. Instead, they decided to leave the framed "sacred" covenant in its "sacred" spot on what was now the fellowship hall wall. When this particular gentleman asked his dad, who was a deacon in the church, about the covenant, his dad said he didn't recall any of the preachers ever talking about it. And one of the gentleman's sisters said, "So that's what that thing is."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we lose sight of the past, as well as the markers that remind us of it. At other times the marker is set before us in such a way that we can't miss it. Take communion as an example. Next Sunday, when we gather for worship, we'll share the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper, as a way of remembering our Lord's death and the reconciliation that God accomplished through it. At the Lord's Table, we recall and reclaim what God did to bring us out of bondage to sin and death. We remember what God has done to roll away the reproach, the shame, of our captivity and disobedience, and to put our sinful past behind us, so that we can live more fully and more faithfully into our identity as God's people.

Several years ago, the Court of Justice of the European Union, Europe's top court, ruled that internet companies can now be forced to remove excessive personal information from search engine results. The case involved a Spanish man who objected to the fact that when his name was searched on Google, it produced links to a 1998 newspaper article about the repossession of his home. The case highlighted the struggle in cyberspace between free speech advocates and supporters of privacy rights who argue that people should have the "right to be forgotten." In other words, they should be able to remove their digital traces from the internet.

In the digital era, trying to put our past behind us, and keep it there, can be even more challenging. This is another example of how we need to draw upon the traditions, practices, and resources of our Christian faith to help us know how to relate to our past, both our personal pasts and our collective pasts. In some respects, we need to rely upon God's mercy and forgiveness to help us leave our past behind, trusting that in Christ he has dealt with our sins, and that they don't have to continue to hold us captive. But in other respects, we need to revisit those things we have done and left undone, in order to learn from the past and make progress as residents of God's kingdom.

As people who are redeemed through Christ and on our way to the fullness of God's reign, we're continually encountering the past and engaging with the past. Sometimes, as I said, this has to do with your personal past and the ways it continues to shape who you are and how you live. At other times, this has to do with our life together as a congregation. Our church, like every church, has a history, a past. We have a story of our life with God, a story filled with both episodes of sinfulness and episodes of sanctification. Times of faithfulness and times of unfaithfulness. Periods of obedience and periods of disobedience. Sometimes we're wandering in the wilderness and sometimes we're crossing over into a better place. And somehow, in the patience, mercy, and sovereign love of God, these pieces of our congregational journey become part of the larger story of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Author Frederick Buechner writes: "Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eyes on the future. There has never been a time past when God wasn't with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom. To remember the past is to see that we are here today by grace, that we have survived as a gift."<sup>3</sup> Remember that our church lives and advances, day by day, by the grace of God.

In one of his sermons, preacher John Claypool told about a thunderstorm that came through southern Kentucky at the farm where his forebears had lived for six generations. Claypool says:

In the orchard, the wind blew over an old pear tree that had been there as long as anybody could remember. The story is that my grandfather was really grieved to lose the tree where he had climbed as a boy and whose fruit he had eaten all his life.

A neighbor came by and said, "Doc, I'm really sorry to see your pear tree blown down."

My grandfather said, "I'm sorry too, it was a real part of my past."

The neighbor said, "What are you going to do?"

My grandfather paused for a long moment and then said, "I'm going to pick the fruit and burn what's left."

That's such a wise way of working with the past. We do need to pick its fruit. We do need to learn its lessons. Amnesia is a sickness and not an asset. But having learned what the past can teach us, we need to pick the fruit, burn what's left, and go on.<sup>4</sup>

There's wisdom in that for the life of our congregation too. Especially as we look back over the past two years, we need to reflect on what we've learned, consider what we can leave behind, and go on. Go on further into the redemption we have in Christ. Go on further into the life of God's kingdom. Go on further into the mission of God's people in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan J. Whitfield. Commentary on Joshua 5:9-12. Working Preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-joshua-59-12-4> (March 23, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> <http://forums.baptistlife.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1773>. October 4, 2005 (November 13, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Reader, Vol. 25, No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> John Claypool, "The Future and Forgetting." Preaching Today, Tape No. 109.