

## **Finishing the Rainbow**

This morning we make another significant leap through the biblical story. After God makes the covenant with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, they continue to make their way to the Promised Land. Just as their destination comes into view, we are told that Moses will not be entering the Promised Land with them. Instead God chooses Joshua as the new leader to guide the people into the next chapter. Joshua leads them into Canaan, giving us some of the most troubling passages in scripture and forcing us to wrestle with stories of violence and bloodshed in God's name. In today's text, however, we meet Joshua at the end of his life. He offers a farewell blessing and challenge to the people. [Joshua 24:1-3a, 13-28]

Over the past few weeks, we have heard about the promises God keeps insisting on making with the people of God, about God's determination to build something new and holy with them, with us. And we have watched the rainbow grow in our midst. On the heels of the flood God gave Noah a glimpse of new life in a tiny green leaf. Then came the promise to old Abraham and Sarah that God would build a nation of descendants more numerous than the golden stars above. Then came the deep red love of God at work in and through Joseph the beloved son who saved a kingdom and his family from famine. We followed the Hebrews through the deep blue sea on dry land and listened as they were given the gift of the law by our one true King, the very one who claimed them as a royal priesthood and gave us the purple piece of the rainbow. And this morning we see orange, the final piece that makes the rainbow complete. Orange can point us to any number of images, the warmth of the sun after too much rain, the radiance of fall leaves as the trees glimmer before drifting to the ground. But this week, I found myself feeling a bit sorry for orange. The rainbow looked pretty complete last week. We could even already see a bit of orange if we squinted just enough. The orange piece seemed to be an afterthought, an also-ran, the piece that we might easily overlook. One could wonder if we even need it.

The first part of the Joshua text rehearses the early history of God and God's people, the history woven before us so far this fall. Joshua gathers the people at Shechem. As my friend and colleague Pen Peery reminds us:

Shechem is a place thick with history and meaning...kind of the 'center of it all.' Shechem is where God addressed Abraham for the first time. Shechem is where Jacob led his family in an idol burying ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

So Shechem has marked a place of covenant making for generations. It makes sense that Joshua would want to invoke holy memories in this band of wanderers who are the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves. They have not been to Shechem before, not in any significant way, but those who came before them have. Those standing before Joshua stand on the shoulders of countless men and women who forged a path for faith in the midst of slavery and the wilderness, whether these in the Promised Land recognize it or not.

This past Monday, the session—the men and women you elect to work alongside me in leading the church and I read and discussed an article together. The author, Erin White tells the story of Norm, an elderly member of a small congregation in rural Massachusetts who humbly and joyfully announced one Sunday that his daughter-in-law had just given birth to twin girls. The congregation erupted with applause, and Norm beamed. A few weeks later, Norm died when the small plane he was piloting crashed in the woods of Vermont. Their pastor emailed to share the news:

'Let us give thanks that we all knew and loved Norman,' he wrote. 'We could tell a thousand stories. We have memories that make us laugh and others that make us cry; we have been so fortunate. That's all I know tonight.'<sup>2</sup>

White goes on to share her own memories of Norm:

In the days after Norman's death I thought often of his last announcement. I imagined that he hadn't been able to sleep after that dawn phone call from his son, so he'd stayed up, maybe had some coffee. He'd remembered that it was Sunday, and that he could go to church and make an announcement. Because that sort of news isn't news you want to keep to yourself. I imagined him combing his hair, stringing a belt through his pants and missing a loop, no one there to tell him. Then pulling on his boots

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<sup>1</sup>Creach, Jerome, *Interpretation: Joshua* (Louisville: John Knox Press), 2003, 119, as cited by Pen Peery in his paper for The Well, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Erin O. White, <https://onbeing.org/blog/erin-white-church-is-what-we-create-with-each-other/>

and making his way to church, where he could breathe some life into his quiet joy and announce his relief for the news of a safe delivery, the miracle of two tiny granddaughters. Where he could join the communion of souls. We don't want to be alone in our happiness just as much as we don't want to be alone in our grief.<sup>3</sup>

White goes on to write that she soon learned about Norm's larger life as a famous explorer who had crossed the Atlantic on a reed raft and mined for gold in Alaska. But Norm's fame and grand accomplishments were not what made him a beloved part of the church. It was his saying "yes" time and again to showing up, to being church, to sharing in prayers and announcements, to offering help for refugees and neighbors, holding hands with grieving friends, and singing the hymns.

Yesterday, I officiated a wedding here in this sanctuary. One of the readings was written by Bob Marley entitled, "He's Not Perfect." In the midst of the reflection is a line that says, "He isn't going to quote poetry...but he will give you a part of him that he knows you could break."<sup>4</sup> That's church; that's what it means to be a covenant people. To be in covenant with God and one another means being vulnerable, showing who we truly are, offering parts of ourselves that we know others could break. It is risky to stand up and recommit to God and to God's community. It is a risk to say, "Yes." God's faithfulness is the foundation on which we stand as individuals and as a church, but when Joshua calls the tribes to renew their commitment to the God of Israel, he is asking them not to lean on what they can control or on the easy loyalties that look like surer bets. Instead he is asking them to pledge themselves anew heart, mind, and soul to the God who has been faithful through flood and desert, through slavery and freedom. He is also calling them to renew their commitment to the community God is seeking to build in and through them. This God has been the covenant-keeper all along, and the final piece of the puzzle, the last swath of the rainbow lies in the hands of the people. Will they say yes? Will we say yes? Will we take the risk? Will we share the journey? Will we commit not only to God, but to the community in which God has placed us? Will we risk laughter and tears with one another? Will we invest our

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<sup>3</sup> White

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/361858-he-s-not-perfect-you-aren-t-either-and-the-two-of>

time, our talents, our treasure, and our very selves in this place and with these people? Will we agree to be present with one another, trusting God and one another with the parts of us that can be broken?

We stand at our own Shechem of sorts in this corner of Allendale. We worship in a space we did not build, under a roof we did not erect, surrounded by crosses we did not carve. Each time we return, each time we gather, Joshua's challenge comes to us: "Choose this day whom you will serve." And you choose. Every time you show up. Each time you help a child fill out a nametag. Every time you write a check. Each time you attend a committee meeting or shovel snow. Every time you chat with a friend over coffee and doughnuts. Each time you learn a person's name and ask about her week. Every time you share a piece of yourself, a piece that may not make your obituary, but a tender piece that another could break or bruise, you say "yes," to serving the God who risks his heart, too. Because the God of the universe is not seeking to build kingdoms of walls, windows, and stone. This God is looking to build a people to share in the holy work of serving those in need, honoring the weak, tending the sick, standing for justice, and bringing freedom to those in prisons of all kinds. This God is hoping to continue God's saving ways of justice and peace through human communities like this one. And every time we turn back toward him, every time we shape our week and our priorities according to God's will and leading, we say "yes" to our part in continuing the story. We have other choices; we can put our faith in any number of other options. But when we say yes, when we choose to follow and worship the God who has brought us this far, when we acknowledge that we did not get this far on our own wits or strength or skill, when we give thanks to the God who saved us then and saves us now, when we commit ourselves again to that God and to that God's saving ways, we add the orange, and the rainbow comes into focus. We come to realize that we needed the orange all along, that the other colors are brighter with it there. And then, all of God's promises shine brighter not only for us, but for this world God is still determined to save, no matter how many times we break God's heart.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.