

No Slackers

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Joshua 1:5-6, 18:1-6

Today we're going to be looking at some passages from Joshua. The idea here is that Labor Day is sort of a second New Year's Day. We might think that we've got a new year ahead of us and so we'll ask the question, where are you headed in this new year? What is it that you hope to accomplish? What are your goals for the next school year?

We're going to look at these passages from Joshua and find out more about this. So listen now as we hear these Scriptures read from the Old Testament.

No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Joshua 1:5-6 (NRSV)

Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them. There remained among the Israelites seven tribes whose inheritance had not yet been apportioned. So Joshua said to the Israelites, "How long will you be slack about going in and taking possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you? Provide three men from each tribe, and I will send them out that they may begin to go throughout the land, writing a description of it with a view to their inheritances. Then come back to me. They shall divide it into seven portions, Judah continuing in its territory on the south, and the house of Joseph in their territory on the north. You shall describe the land in seven divisions and bring the description here to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the LORD our God. Joshua 18:1-6 (NRSV)

That was amazing, choir. You don't need these people that always sit in these rows, you don't need them. By the way, our choir season kicks off Wednesday with their potluck dinner at 5 p.m. and our Veritas Men's Choir and the St. Cecilia Women's choir rehearse at 6 p.m. and then Chancel Choir at 7:15. It is an amazing community of people and you are welcome to come

and be a part of it. You don't have to be a virtuoso singer, just have a heart that loves to sing. If you're no good they'll put someone on either side of you who will blow in your ears enough that you hang in there. We'd love to have you in our choir.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel and then O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

There is a wonderful little dialogue in *Alice In Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. It's rather famous but I love the conversation. It's between Alice and the Cheshire Cat. Alice has arrived in Wonderland and she runs across the Cheshire Cat. She says, "Will you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?" The Cheshire Cat replies, "Well that depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Alice said, "I don't much care where." The Cat then said, "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Now it seems so obvious and so silly, but the truth is that it's like a lot of our lives. We're not sure where we're trying to get. So how do we know what we're supposed to do?

Let me give you the context of the passage today. Moses has led the Children of Israel all the way through the Wilderness right to the edge of the Jordan River. Joshua's job is to lead them across into the land of Canaan and to take possession of it. In our first Scripture the Lord is speaking to Joshua, who is terrified of the battles ahead. Six times in the first two chapters the Lord says, "I was with Moses, I'll be with you, now be strong and courageous. Be strong and of good courage." He repeats it – be strong and courageous...be strong and courageous.

So they go in and take possession of the land, but the first 12 chapters of Joshua are about the conquest of Canaan and after that is how the land was divided between the 11 tribes. There are 12 tribes, but the tribe of Levi consisted of priests and they weren't given a portion of land. They were to be supported not by farming, but by the temple.

The other 11 tribes are left and four of them have taken possession – they've drawn the boundaries of their land. But seven of them have not. So Joshua says to the other seven tribes of Israel: "How long will you be slack about going in and taking possession? Go! What are you doing?"

It's a challenge and when I read that line echoing in my ear – how long will you be slack about taking possession of what the Lord your God has given you?

There are four things I hope you'll see in this as we look toward a new school year. The first is that in order to know where to go we have to build a partnership with God. I want you to hear this part of verse three: "Taking possession of the land that the Lord the God of your ancestors has given you."

Do you see the two pieces of that? On one hand it's the Lord giving it and the other piece is taking possession of it. It takes both components. So we have to build this partnership with God. It isn't the case where you simply say something like, "God, this is what I want to do? Will you bless it for me?" The question is not what we want, rather it's what God wants for us.

We ask the question, "God what is your vision for me, your preferred future for me? Where is it you want me to go? What is it that you have in store, that you want me to accomplish?" That's the question we ask. So much of the time what we're doing is we're saying, "This is what I want, I think, God will you bless this?" Then we play this game where if it doesn't go well then God must not be blessing it and so therefore, I've got to be doing something else.

I got this text message from my daughter Kendall this week about her son Pace. Now Pace is a brilliant child at age 4 with the most amazing name, mostly - Pace. So he's at St. Luke's Day School and here's the conversation. Pace says, "Okay, I'm going to pray now about the new school day tomorrow." Kendall says, "Good idea!" and Pace prays, "Dear Jesus, please let me get more time on the computer than anyone else, Amen." Kendall responds, "Hmmm, anything else?" Pace says, "Nope, that's it – that's all I have to say!"

We laugh at it, but that's half our prayer life, isn't it? That's what we pray. We say, "God, this is what I want." But the question is, not what I want but what God wants for us. What God wants through us.

Now similarly, it's not that we take no initiative at all, we have to take possession of it. We have to reach out and take hold of that which God wants for us. So it's that partnership.

Now what that means is for us to know where God wants us is not clear. It's difficult and challenging. That's why we invest so much in building that partnership. It's why we encourage you to build a prayer life that's significant and not just token. That you really connect. The Scripture says, "My sheep know my voice." Have you been talking to God enough that you can know God's voice?

That's why we spend so much time challenging you not just to read the Bible, but to study it, to make it your home, to learn about it, so that you can learn and understand how God works in the world and then see where you fit into that. That's why we encourage you to come and be a part of a community, a Sunday school class, so you can listen to other people and reflect together on how God works in our lives and learn from one another.

So maybe for the 2019-2020 school year your only goal is to say "I need to build a partnership with God. I'm trying this on my own and I need to ask that question – 'God, what do you want for me?'" And learn to listen for that voice. Sometimes it's absolutely clear but sometimes you have to step out in faith.

Here's the second thing I hope you will see. In this chapter in verse one and two six times it says, "Be strong and courageous!" I think one of the ways we ask what God wants for us is to ask the question: "What would the step of courage be?" Over and over throughout Scripture you hear those words "Fear not!" So what would the step of courage be?

Sid Davis has a question he asks that I like, and it's always sort of stuck with me. It is "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" So much of the time we operate out of our fears. We're afraid we'll fail, we're afraid we will be judged by other people, or we're afraid we'll be rejected. Or, we're afraid that life will be difficult. We're afraid we'll let go of something we've got - to pursue something that isn't going to come to pass, and then we will have let go of what we've got. We've let go of the bird in hand when we should have chased these others, so we live out of this captivity to our fears and anxieties. Instead of hearing that voice from God saying, 'Be strong and courageous!' What would you do if you weren't afraid?

We've been in conversation with Lawson Gow who is a member of St. Luke's and he operates a program called the "Cannon." It's a small business incubator accelerator and it's located in a huge warehouse. People who are starting small businesses sign up to come and work there. Some have offices, and some just sit at tables in the room that's there. They network with one another and they have resources that come, people to teach them about HR and marketing, and all sorts of other things. They gather there and get connected with other resources, people who might want to invest in them. It's this community of people who are entrepreneurs.

We've been talking to him because we're considering a social enterprise incubator accelerator. What would it be like if we got people together who really wanted to make a difference in our city? Our vision is to have a city transformed by the love of Jesus, so we've been talking to him about that.

In the conversation he said, "Eighty percent of the businesses here are going to fail." Then he used a phrase that we've been laughing about. He said, "These people live with delusional optimism. They just think 'It's gonna work! It's gonna work!' And then they step out in faith. And maybe it fails, but they've decided they're not going to be captive to their fear, so they ask themselves "What would I do if I weren't afraid?"

When we ask that question and hear God's voice saying, "Be strong and courageous!" It doesn't mean you throw caution to the wind and it doesn't mean you're not prudent. It doesn't mean you don't play the game smart. But it means that you don't live out of fear or out of scarcity, but out of abundance and stepping forward.

Here's the third thing that I've seen in this passage. It comes twice. The first is in verse four Joshua tells them to write a description of the land with a view to their inheritances. Then in verse six he says it again: "You shall describe the land in seven divisions and bring the description here to me."

The third thing we have to do is to get some clarity about the specifics of what we're trying to do and where we're trying to go.

Daryl Pace (no relation to me) is a world-famous archer. He's probably America's best archer ever. He won the gold medal in 1976, and in 1980 the U.S. boycotted the Olympics, and in 1984 he won the gold medal again. He won the world championships in 1975 and 1979. The best U.S. archer ever. He was able to hit the bullseye three times in a row over and over again. He would take three shots and every time he hit the bullseye. Just amazing.

So they did an experiment. They blindfolded him, spun him around three times, and they said, "Shoot at the target." It is amazing he didn't even hit the target. Didn't even hit the big giant target, much less the bullseye. How can you possibly know where to go unless you know what the target is? Unless you actually know what you're trying to take hold of?

When my wife and I were first dating we went to her grandmother's house. Now her grandmother had a big family, lots of grandkids, and great-grandkids. She was older. And I was sitting there in her family room and there's a little dish on the end table. I pick up the dish and

look under it, and there's a piece of masking tape on it and it says, "Darla." So I asked, "Why is "Darla's name there?" And my wife said, "It's because Grandma wants us to go through the house and write on the bottom of the objects what we want when she dies." I said, "That's creepy!" And my wife said, "No, Grandma wants us to do that. She wants us to identify what we really like and want."

I thought that was great. Let's just decide that that's what I'm going to reach for. That is my inheritance, and my job is to take possession of my inheritance. You have to decide and say, "I'm going to write down the specifics of where I think God's calling me." In this upcoming year write a description of where you want to get to. That's not proper English – To where you want to get.

Let me give you an example. If I say, "I want to be a better husband" then here's what I write down. "I will tell my wife I love her every morning before I leave. If I leave before she gets up, I'm going to write her a note. I'm going to contact my wife at least one time during the work day to let her know I'm thinking about her and to find out what's going on with her. I'm going to sit with my wife during dinner and listen to her instead of watching the Astros game on my phone beside my plate."

Between services someone said, "Boy, you really messed that up for us, Pace! Thanks! Nicely done!" But you see the specifics? To be specific and clear, to get some clarity about exactly where you want to go and how you want to get there. Write a description with a view to your inheritance.

The last thing here is this wonderful verse three: "How long will you be a slacker?" At some point you have to do the work. How long will you be slack? Sometimes it's translated "How long will you be a slacker?" At some point you have to do the work.

There's a marvelous book out by Stephen Pressfield and it's somewhat older, not brand new. It's called *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles*. You may have heard of the famous book, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, but this is the opposite. It's aimed at artists and writers and other creative folks challenging them to pursue that art. I've read it a number of times and it's so appropriate to our lives whether you're an artist or not.

I want to read you some of it: "Most of us have two lives. The life we live and the unlived life within us. And between the two stands resistance ..." He gives it a capital R – Resistance. "...Have you ever brought home a treadmill and let it gather dust in the attic? Have you ever quit

a diet? A course of yoga or a meditation practice? Have you ever bailed out on a call to embark on a spiritual practice or dedicate yourself to a humanitarian calling or commit your life to the service of others? Have you ever wanted to be a doctor, an advocate for the weak and helpless? To run for office? To crusade for the planet, or to campaign for world peace or to preserve the environment? Late at night have you ever experienced a vision of the person you might become, the work you might have accomplished, the realized being you were meant to be? Are you a writer who doesn't write? A painter who doesn't paint? An entrepreneur who never starts a venture? If so, then you know what resistance is. Resistance is that which makes us not do anything but just think about it, dream about it, wish, hope for it.”

Joshua says, “How long are you going to be a dreamer and a wisher and a hoper? How long will you be slack and not do the work?”

Perhaps you're familiar with Randy Pausch. He was a professor at Carnegie Mellon who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and who had a treatment for it. He did pretty well for a while, but the cancer returned, and they were discontinuing treatment. He was a very popular professor and he advertised that he was going to give his last lecture. He did, and the auditorium was packed with people. You probably saw the YouTube video – it went viral a number of years ago. Now it's become a book called *The Last Lecture*. In it he reflects on what he learned in his life. It's sort of a basic reflection of his life. He talks about the things he learned from his failures. He used as an example how he wanted to play football. He said, “I really wanted to play football competitively and as a kid I had football coaches, but I just wasn't good enough.”

Here's what he reflects: “It isn't always bad when the coach is yelling at you because when you're screwing up and no one is saying anything to you anymore, that means they've given up on you. Brick walls are there for a reason. Brick walls aren't there to keep us out, they're there to show us how badly we want things. Brick walls are there to challenge us to do whatever it takes to get through the brick walls.”

So the brick walls are resistance. They're the thing that make us be dreamers but not reach for it. Not take possession of the land that God has given to us, to take hold of our inheritance. We have to do the work – to kick down some brick walls.

So let me leave you today with some questions. First, what is it you think God wants for you? Write a description. Second, what would you do if you were not afraid? Third, what exactly does your inheritance look like? Get clarity. And fourth, how long will you be slack in taking possession of God's future for you?

Let's pray together. *O God, we know you have created us for purpose, you have made us with intentionality, and you have vision for our futures. We pray, God, that you would make those clear to us. Give us the discipline to build that partnership with you that we might learn your voice and hear the place to which you call us. Push aside our fears, God, and give us the courage to step out in faith. Help us to be specific, God, and then to do the work that we might take hold of the land that you have given us. In the name of Christ, Amen.*