

Transitions: Moses to Joshua

Deuteronomy 31:1-13

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It's hard to overstate the importance of Moses in Israelite history. In fact, Moses cast such a huge shadow among the early Jews who began to follow Jesus that the writer of the book of Hebrews in our New Testament felt it necessary to write an entire chapter showing how Jesus is greater than Moses. When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness to the Promised Land, he didn't think he was qualified. But in fact, Moses was custom-made for the job. He had been raised in Pharaoh's household, so he spoke the Egyptian language and had relationship with the royal court. His work as a shepherd gave him familiarity with the wilderness and taught him lessons about moving lots of individuals from one place to another.

Even though the Israelites bitterly complained about Moses in the early days of their wilderness wandering, Moses' intimacy with God and faithfulness to God eventually earned the respect of the Israelites. In fact, they grew deeply dependent upon Moses as they neared the Promised Land. So, we can only imagine how the Israelites would have felt when, just as they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses announced that he wasn't the leader to take them across the Jordan River. Instead, God was calling a young man named Joshua to take on the mantle of leadership.

Our Scripture reading today is from Deuteronomy 31. Moses is speaking to the Israelites, reminding them of God's covenant with them and calling the Israelites to be faithful to that covenant. In this passage he wraps up his instructions and passes leadership of the Israelites onto Joshua. Let's join the story there.

When Moses had finished giving these instructions to all the people of Israel, he said, "I am now 120 years old, and I am no longer able to lead you. The Lord has told me, 'You will not cross the Jordan River.' But the Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you. So be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic before them. For the Lord your God

will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you." Then Moses called for Joshua, and as all Israel watched, he said to him, "Be strong and courageous! For you will lead these people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors he would give them. You are the one who will divide it among them as their grants of land. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you." So Moses wrote this entire body of instruction in a book and gave it to the priests, who carried the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, and to the elders of Israel. Then Moses gave them this command: "At the end of every seventh year, the Year of Release, during the Festival of Shelters, you must read this Book of Instruction to all the people of Israel when they assemble before the Lord your God at the place he chooses. Call them all together—men, women, children, and the foreigners living in your towns—so they may hear this Book of Instruction and learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully obey all the terms of these instructions. Do this so that your children who have not known these instructions will hear them and will learn to fear the Lord your God. Do this as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy."

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

This section of Moses' story is filled with wisdom for churches like ours that are experiencing leadership transitions. I want to highlight four that I think are particularly relevant.

First, God calls specific leaders for specific legs of the journey. As I said, Moses was custom-built for the job of setting the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt and leading them through their 40 years of wilderness wandering. He wasn't perfect. He made mistakes. But he got the job done. But now that job was over. Mission accomplished. You might be tempted to think that Moses was done leading because he was 120 years old, but that's not it. Moses was done leading because God said he was done. God had a new leader in mind for this next leg of the journey. Joshua was just the right leader to take the Israelites into the Promised Land and settle there.

As you might imagine, I've been reflected a lot on my time here at Prince of Peace. And as I look back it's clear to me that while I made lots of mistakes and there were days I had no idea what I was doing, I also see how everything I'd experienced leading up to coming here perfectly prepared me to do that work I believe I was called to do. Like everyone, I have strengths and weaknesses, but my call here played to my strengths. And I'm so grateful to God for that calling, and for you for giving me a shot. But like Moses I sense God saying, "Your work is done. It's time for a new leg of the journey, and I will call just the right person with just the right gifts and strengths to lead my people." I take comfort in that, and I hope you do too.

Second, there will be barriers on the journey of accomplishing God's work. For the Israelites those barriers came in the form of hostile nations. That's not likely to be a problem for Prince of Peace, but there will be barriers. There will be "enemies" that will get in your way and even grind your momentum to a halt if you allow them. And perhaps the greatest of those enemies will be resistance to change. Friends, things are going to be different. Accept that now. And for most of us we have a negative first reaction to change. So right now, make a commitment that when you feel that resistance rise up in you, you're going to take a deep breath and exercise patience. Adopt an "let's wait and see how this goes" attitude before judging change as negative.

Back in the day when we were struggling financially, Jane and I had the idea of giving the staff the week of Fourth of July off, not just to give them a change to catch their breath but to save on utility costs. The reaction to that change the first year was pretty negative. We were told by numerous staff why that wouldn't work, couldn't work. But we pressed ahead. And today, if we announced that we were not longer going to offer that week of staff sabbath we'd have mutiny on our hands.

There will be plenty of barriers on the journey ahead. Don't let resistance to change be one of them.

Third, trust that God is on the journey with you. The Israelites were about experience momentous change. All the questions of who, what, where and when that rattled around in their heads were

unanswered. They were marinating in uncertainty. And so Moses, being a wise leader, pointed the people to the one great certainty that anchors people of faith who wander in the wilderness – God's presence. The One who had been with them every step along the way of their 40 years of wandering, the One who fed them with manna every morning, the One who guided them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, would go with them into the great unknown.

And the same is true for us. Looking back over the past 15 years I'm reminded of the many ways in which God's presence was manifested among us. Financial resources showing up when we didn't have two nickels to rub together. Just the right person with just the right gifts when we needed a leader. An out-of-the-box idea when we felt stuck in a box. You can call them coincidences, but I'm calling them miracles, and they happened time and time again, reminding us that there is always more going on than our eyes can see. God is with us, and God will be with Prince of Peace as you move forward on this journey into the future that God has in store for you. When you get to feeling anxious or uncertain...remember that.

And finally, stay grounded in God's Word. Moses instructed the people to listen to the book of instruction being read every seven years. This is the instructions that God had revealed and Moses had recorded. And they weren't just to hear the words; they were to obey them. Now, we might hear that as confining, but the Israelites heard it as good news. They were overwhelmed with gratitude that God loved them so much that God would give them instruction to keep them safe and well and, on the path most likely to bless them as a people. And I would commend that same thing to you as we move through this season of change and transition. Come to the Engage Bible Study. Get into a small group. Check out the Vine catalog and see the diversity of opportunities available to all of us to be grounded in Scripture. And just as Moses instructed parents to share God's Word with their kids, I would encourage you to be sharing this journey with your kids and grandkids. And why is that important? Because Scripture reminds us of the promises of God. That we are loved. That we are never alone. That God is at work in you. We need to be reminded of that, and so do our kids and grandkids and all the

other children in our lives. Here is just one example from Philippians 2, "God will continually revitalize you, giving you the desire and the power to do what honors God."

Let's personalize that verse and say it together, "God will continually revitalize me, giving me the desire and the power to do what honors God."

Say again, but this time say it like you believe it, "God will continually revitalize me, giving me the desire and the power to do what honors God."

I want you to commit that verse to memory, and here's why. While the Gospel never changes, Prince of Peace must change to thrive in the world around us that is constantly changing. And the most important change at Prince of Price is not who sits in the Lead Pastor's office, but the change that happens in each and every one of you. Thank God that God is at revitalizing you, giving you the desire and the power to do what honors God.