

Now What? The Next Step

January 4, 2009

Year B: Epiphany Sunday

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Joshua 1:1-11 (NRSV)

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, **2**"My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. **3**Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. **4**From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. **5**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. **6**Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. **7**Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. **8**This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. **9**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."

10Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, **11**"Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess.' "

One Sunday morning a mother was getting ready for church when she noticed her son wasn't up yet. She finally went in to wake him up. "Come on, get up. . . you'll miss church!" she said.

"No, I don't want to go!" came the reply from her son as he buried his head under the pillow.

"Yes, you have to get up for church," the mother coaxed.

"No, I am not going to church. And I'll give you two reasons why: Number 1) nobody likes me and number 2) I don't like them."

The mother put her hands on her hips and replied indignantly, "Well you ARE going to church and I'll give you two reasons why you are going: Number 1) You are 45 years old, and number 2) You are the pastor!"

When I was in Lincoln over vacation I took the time to read my parents newspaper. Just before New Year's Day, the *Lincoln Journal Star* had a section completely devoted to the New Year's Day hangover. It talked about ways to avoid the hangover, it mentioned ideas to lesson it, it listed remedies, and then there was one paragraph that was interesting to read. It said that one could just endure it. Now that section came out before the New Year and whether you woke up on Thursday morning a little under the weather, a bit tired, or even ready to challenge this New Year, we come to this Sunday asking ourselves – It's the New Year, *now what?* The New Year is behind us, Christmas is now over, the Gator Bowl (and what a bowl game) has been played, and its official we are now in a recession, and we may have already broken one or all of our New Year's Resolutions; so. . . now what?

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, ²"My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.

This passage may be a bit familiar to you. You may remember my sermon series from just a few months ago where we were proceeding to the Promised Land. Do you remember how that series ended? Moses dies just shy of the Promised Land. He can see it, he probably could feel the very wind of this new land but he was not allowed to enter. In fact, it became the job of Moses' inheritors – us – it became our job to pick up the vision of Moses and proceed into the Promised Land. Well, folks, here we are; its 2009, a New Year, with new opportunities, a time to try things over again. For the Hebrew people, their greatest leader, the person they've been following has just died. So. . . now what? God says, its time to get up, time to move forward, and more importantly, time to take the next step.

Listen to this story. Consumed by my loss, I didn't notice the hardness of the pew where I sat. I was at the funeral of my dearest friend - my mother. She had finally lost her long battle with cancer. The hurt was so intense, I found it hard to breathe at times. Always supportive, Mother clapped loudest at my school plays, held a box of tissues while listening to my first heartbreak, comforted me at my father's death, encouraged me in college, and prayed for me my entire life.

When Mother's illness was diagnosed, my sister had a new baby and my brother had recently married his childhood sweetheart, so it fell on me, the 27-year-old middle child without entanglements, to take care of her. I counted it an honor.

"What now, Lord?" I asked sitting in church. My life stretched out before me as an empty abyss. My brother sat stoically with his face toward the cross while clutching his wife's hand. My sister sat slumped against her husband's shoulder, his arms around her as she cradled their child. All were so deeply grieving, no one noticed I sat alone.

My place had been with our mother, preparing her meals, helping her walk, taking her to the doctor, seeing to her medication, reading the Bible together. Now she was with the Lord. My work was finished, and I was alone.

I heard a door open and slam shut at the back of the church. Quick footsteps hurried along the carpeted floor. An exasperated young man looked around briefly and then sat next to me. He folded his hands and placed them on his lap. His eyes were brimming with tears. He began to sniffle.

"I'm late," he explained, though no explanation was necessary. After several eulogies, he leaned over and commented, "Why do they keep calling her by the name of 'Margaret'? Her name is Mary.

"Because her name is Margaret. Never Mary. No one called her 'Mary,'" I whispered. I wondered why this person couldn't have sat on the other side of the church. He interrupted my grieving with his tears and fidgeting. Who was this stranger anyway?

"No, that isn't correct," he insisted, as several people glanced over at us whispering, "Her name is Mary, Mary Peters."

"That isn't who this is."

"Isn't this the Lutheran Church?"

"No, the Lutheran Church is across the street."

"Oh."

"I believe you're at the wrong funeral, Sir."

The solemnity of the occasion mixed with the realization of the man's mistake bubbled up inside me and came out as laughter. I cupped my hands over my face, hoping it would be interpreted as sobs. The creaking pew gave me away. Sharp looks from other mourners only made the situation seem more hilarious. I peeked at the bewildered, misguided man seated beside me. He was laughing, too, as he glanced around, deciding it was too late for an uneventful exit. I imagined mother laughing.

At the final "Amen," we darted out a door and into the parking lot. "I do believe we'll be the talk of the town," he smiled. He said his name was Rick and since he had missed his aunt's funeral, asked me out for a cup of coffee. That afternoon began a life-long journey for me with this man who attended the wrong funeral, but was in the right place. A year after our meeting, we were married at a country church where he was the assistant pastor. This time we both arrived at the same church right on time.

In my time of sorrow, God gave me laughter. In place of loneliness, God gave me love. This past June we celebrated our twenty-second wedding anniversary.

Whenever anyone asks us how we met, Rick tells them, "Her mother and my Aunt Mary introduced us, and it's truly a match made in heaven."

Folks, I've been with a lot of people in their moment of grief. Many of you are recipients of my pastoral care. One thing you know that is the hardest is not the death, not the funeral, the hardest part of grief is when the funeral is over, family has left, and you adjust to life without your loved one. That is when you ask the question: now what? This is why we are reading the Book of Joshua this month.

Last Wednesday night we watched the ball drop at Midnight. Most of us were happy. Emma was happy that she got to stay up late. Olivia was happy – no we were happy – because Olivia was asleep. But Cora was having a hard time. In this euphoria she was a bit emotional. I asked her why and she said she was going to miss '08. 2008 had been a very good year, a good year for her. I tried telling her that 2009 would be a fun year, even a good year, and that we did not know what it will bring. Now I realize that she was tired (it was well past her bedtime) and that was part of it. But Cora, in that moment, kept looking back at the past year, instead of the next step.

Folks, this quest for the next step does not come easy. For some asking that question "now what?" means looking back. Remember the first time the Big 3 Auto makers went up to Capital Hill asking for a bailout. Not once did any of those CEO's talk about the next stop. Each one talked about what a disaster the economy would be in if they did not get their loan. I even remember seeing a headline in the newspaper that read: "There is no plan B." They were stuck in an old year, an old way of making cars, an old way of doing business. When asking "now what?" they want to go back to the way things were.

One of the worst things we can do when coming to that question of "now what?" is taking a step back. It's easy to do. The past year for some was a very good year. You had a retirement fund, or a job, or a house, or hope. In the past it is safe. You know what to expect. But the next step especially for the Hebrew people in following a new leader to a new land is always full of uncertainties. But God tells us it's OK.

The Sunday after Christmas, we had the opportunity to attend worship in the church where Emma was baptized and Cora had her first worship experience. It was the first time for me to go back to an old appointment. The pastor there now is a wonderful woman doing a great job and it was fantastic to see and reconnect with old parishioners. As Sarah and I sat in the pews we looked around. We saw the same old Christmas decorations that we helped put up. I saw the CD player that we purchased so we could use when our organist was not available. I saw on the wall a plaque of *The Last Supper* that I purchased for the church when I went to Guatemala. It was the same old church that we had served so many years ago. Sarah even noticed that our old friends even sat in their same pews. It was great to go back. But this is also a church then when I served there would on numerous occasions tell me about the full parking lot or tell me of a time when the pews were full of people that did not live in that community anymore.

I tell you it was great to go back. We'd been gone for nine years and nothing had changed. Maybe you had that experience over Christmas. You went back to a church where everything was exactly the same as when you left. But for the people of God

they don't have that choice. They can't go back to the way it was. In fact, God doesn't want them to. God wants them to take the next step for that is when things get better.

One of the best comments I heard over Christmas was from a parishioner who had not been here in many years. As she came into this church she was expecting a building that was going to be difficult to enter. Instead she found a church with a button that opened the doors at ease. She found an elevator that granted her access to parts of the building that she hadn't been to in years. She found a church that was not the same but had taken the next step.

Folks, this is why we are reading the Book of Joshua here in the New Year. It is good for anyone whose life is stuck, who can't move forward, whose life is just in neutral. Joshua is good when that longing for the past does not allow us to look to the future. Following the trek of the Hebrew people into the Promised Land is good for anyone who is threatened by a year of the unknown.

6Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 7Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. 8This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.

Be strong and courageous, follow God's rules, and take the next step.

Several times my daughter had telephoned to say. . . "Mother, you must come see the daffodils before they are over."

I wanted to go, but it was a two-hour drive from Laguna to Lake Arrowhead. "I will come next Tuesday," I promised, a little reluctantly, on her third call.

Next Tuesday dawned cold and rainy. Still, I had promised, and so I drove there. When I finally walked into Carolyn's house and hugged and greeted my grandchildren. I said, "Forget the daffodils, Carolyn! The road is invisible in the clouds and fog, and there is nothing in the world except you and these children that I want to see bad enough to drive another inch!"

My daughter smiled calmly, "We drive in this all the time, Mother."

"Well, you won't get me back on the road until it clears -- and then I'm heading for home!" I assured her.

"I was hoping you'd take me over to the garage to pick up my car."

"How far will we have to drive?"

"Just a few blocks," Carolyn said, "I'll drive. I'm used to this."

After several minutes I had to ask, "Where are we going? This isn't the way to the garage!"

"We're going to my garage the long way," Carolyn smiled. "By way of the daffodils."

"Carolyn," I said sternly, "please turn around."

"It's all right, Mother, I promise, you will never forgive yourself if you miss this experience."

After about twenty minutes we turned onto a small gravel road and I saw a small church. On the far side of the church I saw a hand-lettered sign "Daffodil Garden." We got out of the car and each took a child's hand, and I followed Carolyn down the path. Then we turned a corner of the path, and I looked up and gasped. Before me lay the most glorious sight. It looked as though someone had taken a great vat of gold and poured it down over the mountain peak and slopes. The flowers were planted in majestic, swirling patterns, great ribbons, and swaths of deep orange, white, lemon yellow, salmon pink, saffron, and butter yellow. Each different-colored variety was planted as a group so that it swirled and flowed like its own river with its own unique hue. Five acres of flowers.

"But who has done this?" I asked Carolyn.

"It's just one woman" Carolyn answered. "She lives on the property. That's her home." Carolyn pointed to a well-kept A-Frame house that looked small and modest in the midst of all that glory. We walked up to the house. On the patio we saw a poster. "Answers to the questions I Know You Are Asking" was the headline. The first answer was a simple one: "50,000 bulbs," it read.

The second answer was "One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet, and a very little brain."

The third answer was, "Began in 1958."

There it was. The Daffodil Principle. For me that moment was a life-changing experience. I thought of this woman who I had never met, who, more than thirty-five years before, had begun -- one bulb at a time -- to bring her vision of beauty and joy to an obscure mountain top. Still, just planting one bulb at a time, year after year, had changed the world. This unknown woman had forever changed the world in which she lived. She had created something of ineffable magnificence, beauty, and inspiration.

The principle her daffodil garden taught is one of the greatest principles of celebration: learning to move toward our goals and desires one step at a time -- often just one baby-step at a time -- learning to love the doing, learning to use the accumulation of time. When we multiply tiny pieces of time with small increments of daily effort, we too will find we can accomplish magnificent things. We can change the world.

“It makes me sad in a way,” I admitted to Carolyn. “What might I have accomplished if I had thought of a wonderful goal thirty-five years ago and had worked away at it ‘one bulb at a time through all those years. Just think what I might have been able to achieve!”

My daughter summed up the message of the day in her direct way. “Start tomorrow,” she said.

Folks, we’re not going to start tomorrow. Taking the next step happens today. It’s the New Year – now what’s next?

