

Welcome Back to What?

Joshua 1:6-9

Our text today is pretty straightforward and clear. Here's what's happening: The Israelites have been released from slavery in Egypt, but they were a little weak on the twin ideas of gratitude and obedience, and so God had them wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Even Moses got old and died during that time, and so now Joshua is their leader.

After all the wandering and problems and negotiating with Moses and the people over the years, here's where we are. God's people want to know how long they have to wait before they get to the Promised Land, God wants them to trust that he'll do what he said he would do, and Joshua is taking over for the most important leader in Israel's history. Everyone wants a straight answer here, and so God says this very clearly to Joshua.

⁶ "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷ Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

There are a few things to know about this passage as we try to find out what it means for us.

First, the book we call Joshua describes the way God fulfills the covenant he made with his people. The first books of the Old Testament

are filled with promises that God makes to his people, and in Joshua we see some of those begin to be fulfilled.

Second, our text falls within a time of conflict and danger and fear. There are wars, divisions among God's people, frustration with the constant wandering, and struggles with how to live the life of faith.

Finally, for us this text is a reminder of the way God calls us to be his people. Notice that God calls Joshua to three tasks or practices or behaviors: to be strong and courageous, which we can interpret as being faithful and hopeful; to read and study and reflect on the Scriptures God gave us; and to live the way he calls us to live.

Whatever else we see in this text, I want us to take it as a wakeup call for the church—for all of us who want to be followers of Jesus Christ.

There are so many news stories competing for our attention, but one of the most compelling for me is the one about those 33 miners stuck in a hole—trapped underground in Chile. If you haven't seen the story, the men were hit by a cave-in and they survived in a shelter for 17 days before anyone even figured out where they were. Now they've been down there more than a month. The problem is that they're 2,300 feet underground—that's more than half a mile. They're drilling new holes to reach them, but it looks like they won't be rescued until December.

Once they got a communication device down to the men—remember they'd been there for two and a half weeks—most just wanted someone to say clearly and honestly how long it was going to take to get them out of there.

But there's something else about those miners that you might not know. Chile has a long history of mining—for gold and copper and nitrate and coal. It has a long tradition of mining, but not necessarily of mining safety.

When the miners were located they'd already organized themselves into teams—they have regular rations, they sleep and exercise and keep watch over each other in shifts. Most of this isn't part of their health and safety procedures. Most of this is handed down informally from grandfather to father to son—they've gone through so many tragic mining events that they've learned how to be ready—how to take care of each other and *live*.

There's something we can learn from these brave miners.

As a church, how do we gather ourselves and prepare to help each other when disasters happen, or just when normal hard times come? We know that bad things happen in the lives of people we know and care about—how do we get ready for that in our church life? How do we make ourselves ready to step in and care for people when they need us the most?

Maybe, on Welcome Back Sunday, a different way to ask that as we reconnect and enjoy our time together today is this:

Welcome back to what?

I've been thinking about that over the summer and especially this past week or so as we've been preparing for a new church year. I've been thinking about how to give a straight answer to that question...welcome back to what?

Welcome to a community where we try to be strong and courageous—to be faithful and hopeful—even when we really feel weak and afraid. To be faithful and hopeful is to believe that God is who he says he is, and that he'll do what he said he'll do. That's not easy—it's why we do it in community, as a church family. How? That's the second thing.

Welcome to a church family where we're going to dive into the Scriptures and wrestle with what they meant when they were written, so we can understand what they mean for us today. We have a year-long adult Bible study on Sunday mornings where we're going to explore the Psalms. A group of women are going to gather for a 10-week Beth Moore Bible study on the fruit of the Spirit starting in October. Our kids are learning Bible stories as they have fun in Sunday School, and our youth are learning to apply the Scriptures to the questions they're asking about life and faith. Get the idea? We're taking the Bible seriously...and faithfully.

And finally, welcome to a place that is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ—a place that wants to show the world who Christ is through Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship and Mission. As we start a new year make sure you check out the different ways we're going to grow together in this place. The point is that we all develop into the disciples God made us to be.

Those are the same things God told Joshua to do in order to get ready for the road ahead.

Be faithful and hopeful,
Be immersed in the Scriptures,
and make your life a reflection of what you believe.

That's what we want to do in this place as we live in Christian community.

This time of welcoming and welcoming back is a perfect time to say some other things, too. Whether you're new here or you've been coming for a while, here's what I want you to know:

No matter where you've been or what you've done or even what you've believed before, you're welcome here.

Whether you feel close to Jesus or lukewarm about him, or if you feel stuck in a very deep hole and you can't get out, you're welcome here.

This is a place where you can connect with each other and with God, where you can grow in faith and serve Christ's Kingdom—this is a church family made up of people who are looking for forgiveness and wholeness, and we want that message to be as clear as possible.

The promise to Joshua was 'the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.' We believe that here, even when it's a struggle, and we want to be a place where we practice God's presence in everything we say, and everything we do. ---

Over the next few months we're going to focus on what it means to grow in faith together as we look at Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. It's such a great book of the Bible, and I hope you'll join us as we explore what it means for us as a church in London in the 21st century.

For now, though, welcome and welcome back. Let's pray together.