

## Deuteronomy 31: 1-8 Be Strong and Bold!

### Background

- Moses has just instructed the people of Israel to choose life by obeying God's commandments.
- Chapter 31 begins the narrative conclusion to the book of Deuteronomy.
- The 1<sup>st</sup> issue is the appointment of Joshua as the successor to Moses' leadership of the people.
- We've learned earlier in 3:23 that Moses was not allowed to continue leading the people because of his lack of trust in God and because of the people's sin in the wilderness.

This last week I was talking with someone in this congregation about my leaving and they said, "I don't know if we can make it through another change! We're not getting any younger you know!" Change! Some of us get excited by the thought—but most of us dread it! With so much rapid change surrounding us—can't the church be one place where everything and everyone stays the same?

Be strong and bold! These are the words of encouragement of one outgoing leader to the community of people that he had served. Moses had led the people out of the land that they had lived in for years, he had been with them through a time in the wilderness. Now they were on the brink of the Promised Land—and they were as Patrick Miller says, "between landlessness and landed-ness." Moses' time of leadership had come to an end. No longer would he lead God's people-- he would remain while their journey continued.

In some ways, the transition in leadership with Moses and Joshua is like the transition that we are in the midst of here at HPPC. I was called to lead as your interim associate pastor. I was called to journey with you between your settled associate pastors. I found interim ministry with you to be a time of great joy and great challenge. They are intricately related for the joy of being with you in relationship, of finally getting to know at least many of your names, of serving alongside you and equipping you to minister—that joy has led to the challenge—the challenge of saying goodbye. To jump in and then to jump out! That's the challenge of the interim. I've mentioned to some of you how I thought "well it's only a year, I won't get too attached." Wrong! But the sadness is worth it. The privilege of being part of people's lives and especially their faith journeys is a gift beyond compare.

Just as the Lord told Moses that he would not cross over the River Jordan with the people—I knew that my journey with you would end. Several folks have kindly asked, “Why can’t you just stay with us?” Our denomination wisely understands that interim ministry is a unique ministry. Interim pastors have the specific task of preparing a congregation for a new pastor and new ministry. That preparation work would be altered if the interim were vying for that settled position. Also, the interim pastor with established relationships of trust would have an advantage over other candidates. Interim ministry is an important part of leadership transition.

This past week I was at the bible study that meets at Starbucks at 6:30 a.m. DIBs is one of ministries that I inherited from Robin Garvin, the former assoc. pastor here. We were talking about the Holy Spirit, the Counselor. I asked folks, who was someone who had been a counselor to them in their life? Many shared that Robin had served as a wise counselor for them. As a church we have grieved the loss of her. And I believe we have grieved well. We have continued to pray for her and her family and supported them. Robin will always be significant in HPPC journey of faith. She has been dearly missed. Although our scripture doesn’t relate the feelings of the Israelites, I am certain that they grieved as they said goodbye to their leader Moses.

During times of leadership transition it is helpful for a church to look at all of the leadership in the life of the church. We are blessed to have Ken serve as the Head of Staff and I am encouraged that he will continue to lead this beloved community of faith. I have observed during my time here that the lay leadership is growing. More and more people are being equipped to lead, more and more people are feeling empowered to lead, more and more people are claiming God’s call to lead. Be strong and bold!

I see a session that is spending more time in discussion at session meetings—taking an interest and concern in decisions in all areas of ministry. Elders are developing an understanding that they are spiritual leaders of the church, not simply the leader of a designated area of ministry. Be strong and bold!

I see believers, some who are relatively new to the faith, stepping out in faith to lead adult education. Wanting to encourage others to grow in faith they are facilitating classes that earlier they would have left to the professionals. Be strong and bold!

I see disciples who desire to make disciples for our Lord Jesus Christ by leading small groups. They're helping others learn God's Word, teaching folks to pray for one another, caring for each other, reaching out beyond their comfort zones to minister in God's name. Be strong and bold!

I see deacons who thought they were called to be doers of the ministry of care opening up their ministries and inviting others to join them as they lead ministries of care and compassion. Be strong and bold!

Words of encouragement! I have been encouraged by you and by the growth that I have seen. We're not there yet—we haven't reached the Promised Land. There is work to be done to reach out to young adults and young families—folks in their 20s and 30s. There is further work to be done reaching out to teens with no church connection. There is a church, Latah Valley, that we are planting and God continues to call those who have a heart as a missionary to join that ministry. There is work to be done, but that work will be led by Ken, your new associate pastor, Betsey, and your lay leaders.

Our passage this morning reminds me of passing the baton or passing on the torch of leadership. Years ago as many of you know, my husband Scott and I helped to plant a new church in the Philadelphia suburbs. When the church was ready to be chartered or officially organized we celebrated with a charter run. Beginning at the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia founded in 1698 we ran out to the future site of the new church building. We did the 32 miles Olympic torch style passing a cross from person to person for each leg of the run. The cross was a hand-made cherry cross that I had received at my 9<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation at the 1<sup>st</sup> Presb. Church in Ft. Wayne, IN. Our connectedness with other churches runs deep.

The run symbolizes much in leadership. Each runner handed the cross over to the next person in the journey trusting the next person to carry the cross forward. Each runner had a different style of running—some were smooth, some clumsy, some thoughtful, some intense, some would bounce along (and were perky), some would look straight ahead to the goal, while others looked around and enjoyed the surroundings.

Each runner ran different distances. Some were short distance runners, others long, while others were somewhere in between. Some excelled at running in the beginning to get it going while others were more suited to a later stage of the journey.

There is excitement in the journey and there is excitement when the cross is passed on to the next person. I see growing excitement over anticipating the arrival of your new associate pastor, Betsey Moe. She will bring another shift in personality and style. She is not Robin, nor is she me. You have called someone new to lead you as your associate and God has gifted her to run with you for this next leg of your journey.

Your new associate brings not only a new style but new ministry opportunities to you. She will have different eyes, ask her own questions, & offer different ideas and ways of being church. Just as Joshua had the task of leading God's people in a new land, Betsey and Ken have the task of leading you as you realize more fully what God has called this large church to be and become. There will be a month between when I leave June 1<sup>st</sup> and when Betsey arrives. Whenever you see that empty office I hope that you will ask God to open your heart to receive her leadership.

Joshua was called to succeed Moses and to lead the people to the next place that God was calling them to. Our passage this morning though reminds us of the big picture view of leadership. Joshua did not go first into the Promised Land. Scripture reminds us that "The Lord your God himself will cross over before you." God is our true leader. God is faithful. We do not need to fear or dread change. As Patrick Miller points out, "The confidence of God's people in the face of an unknown future is not primarily secured by the presence of a capable leader." So even though Ken stays, even though Betsey I believe will be a wonderful match, our confidence in the future of HPPC is because God is here and God goes before us. One of the tasks of the interim is to encourage a congregation to trust in God for its future. For it is God who will decide who leads, when they lead, and what their ministry tasks will be for that time of the journey. And God is faithful.

Be strong and bold, have not fear or dread...because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Amen.

Sheryl Kinder-Pyle

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