

Saints alive! We’ve finally arrived! The long journey through the wilderness is over! No more manna; we’re going to feast on the fat of the land! No more wandering aimlessly wondering if we’ll ever get there! No more worries about water. We’ve got a whole river to drink from! Just look at all that water!

Wait a minute – look at all that water! We have to cross over that river to enter the Promised Land and its overflowing its banks! And look, once we cross the Jordan, there’s Jericho. That’s the biggest city I’ve ever seen! Look at those walls! How will we ever get past them? And then, off in the distance, those are mountains! No more walking on a smooth plain for us! It looks like a solid wall of rock! We’re never going to make it!

Joshua tells the story of how the children of Israel emerged from the wilderness and entered the Promised Land. It’s a story of conquest, and that raises some uncomfortable questions. *Joshua 3:10 (NRSV)* “*By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites,*”¹ makes me wonder why they all couldn’t just learn to live in peace? Doesn’t God love all those “-ites” too? In a world where race and clan and religion continue to create conflict on a global scale, reading about the great jihad of the Bible should give us pause, should make us uncomfortable, and when we Presbyterians do what we do best – when we think through our discomfort, we can be saints alive; we can build a memorial that will inspire future generations so that they too can be saints alive.

‡ TURN OBSTACLE INTO OPPORTUNITY

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Israel’s obstacles were obvious – a flooded Jordan river, a fortified Jericho, the mountainous edge of the Great Rift Valley. They were obvious and overwhelming.

Our challenges are also obvious and overwhelming. Author Phyllis Tickle describes them as “the Great Emergence.” Her book by that title (available at the Exeter Public Library) reviews the history of the church and identifies the following pattern: Every 500 years, the Church breaks out of the comfortable exoskeleton it has created and outgrown and forms something new. She suggests we are in one of those 500 year cycles of emergence now. If we drop back 500 years to 1500, we are in the age of the Great Reformation, which gave birth among other things to Presbyterianism. The Church both Catholic and Protestant was renewed by what emerged from that debate about the role of scripture and tradition. 500 years before that, 1000 AD, finds the split between the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Coptic Church, which gave birth to a clearer understanding of God and the Trinity. 500 years before that, 500 AD, we have Pope Gregory and the rise of monasticism, the institution that preserved and passed on civilization during a Dark Age. 500 years before that, we find a workingman from Nazareth, God’s own Son, Jesus Christ.

Tickle is the first to admit that history cannot be divided into neat little stages. The flow of history is more of a wave in which things rise and then fall away. We can look at the centuries preceding the Big Change and see that something was coming.

We can look today and see that something is coming. Antietam made the headlines this week for considering hybrid-learning education. Substantial questions were raised, and I hope we will continue to question. The status quo is not sustainable. We can’t keep doing “it,” be “it” business, education, government, health care, social services, or church, or Pennside Presbyterian Church; we can’t keep doing “it” the way we’ve always done it.

Is that an obstacle or an opportunity? Joshua is the story of how the grace of God and the faithfulness of God’s people transformed obstacles into opportunities. The story of our church is the story of turning obstacles into opportunities. This week at Session, we learned about the struggle our church overcame during our early years; we couldn’t pay the mortgage on the building; we negotiated with the bank which forgave all the interest and allowed us to pay only the principal.

We turned an obstacle into an opportunity. We did it then, and this building is a memorial to how God’s grace and the faithfulness of God’s people turned obstacle into opportunity. This building reminds us of what we have done, and what by God’s grace we can do. We can emerge. We can adapt. We can cross over the obstacle and enter the land of opportunity. We did it before. We can do it again.

Υ SAINTS ALIVE!

When we faced that challenge, we probably formed a committee. That’s the Presbyterian thing to do. Twelve men would be too many, but like Joshua, we selected and elected some people, and we kept a record. It’s in the minutes. Those were our 12 stones from the middle of the river Jordan, and the purpose is the same: *Joshua 4:6-7 (NRSV)* ⁶ *so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’* ⁷ *then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.* ^{”2}

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Joshua’s can-do spirit shines in these words. While everyone is fretting about the obstacle, Joshua is preparing to take advantage of the opportunity. He’s already on the other side of the Jordan preparing for the generation to come.

That preparation shifts the focus from himself. It’s not about Joshua. Each tribe selects one man; that man selects one stone; those men build a memorial with those stones. We don’t know their names; we do know their work. Their work shifts the focus from Joshua. It’s not about Joshua; it’s about the grace of God; it’s about the faithfulness of the people; the people of God being the people of God – saints alive.

Next Sunday is Stewardship Sunday. We won’t bring stones. We’ll bring pledge cards; pieces of paper on which we commit ourselves to doing our part in the work of God that is Pennside Presbyterian Church. We won’t bring stones, but we will build a memorial. Our faithfulness now in this time of Great Emergence when the obstacles are obvious and overwhelming will remind us and generations yet to come that God is in the midst of our obstacles, and with God’s help, we can turn obstacles into opportunities.

God can do this. With God’s help, we can do this. Our building is a memorial to that. Pick up your stone this week. Make your pledge. Together, we will cross over the obstacles. Together, we will make the most of our opportunities. Together, we will be a memorial to what God’s grace and our faithfulness can accomplish, for by God’s grace we are saints alive! Amen.