

“The Joshua Generation” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) November 9, 2008

Text: Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God And Joshua said to all the people, Now therefore revere Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. Now if you are unwilling to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.’ Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake Yahweh to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and Yahweh drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for Yahweh is our God.’ But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the LORD, for this a holy God, a jealous God; who will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake Yahweh and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the LORD!’ Then Joshua said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve Yahweh.’ And they said, ‘We are witnesses.’ He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the God of Israel.’ The people said to Joshua, ‘The LORD our God we will serve, Yahweh we will obey.’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Generations were important to the Hebrew people. Interspersed throughout the Bible, both Testaments, are genealogies, like mile markers along a road; catalogs of names; family trees of faith. These are the passages that never get read in worship, lists that seem irrelevant to us. But to the Hebrew people, these lists established identity and continuity. The Jewish people divided their history according to the generations of those who had preceded them --an ever-present reminder that they were part of one great household of people who were defined not by ancestry alone, but by their association with a God, One God, who was ever active in their history.

Our reading falls in the Joshua Generation. Joshua, son of Nun, had received the mantle of leadership from Moses. Born during the bitter realities of slavery, Joshua had experienced the miraculous escape through the Red Sea, the confrontation with the wilderness, the struggles within the people. Joshua alone had been allowed to accompany Moses up the mountain where the tablets of the law were received. Then finally, Joshua received the blessing of Moses and of Yahweh as Moses looked across the Jordan at the Promised Land. Moses ascended to heaven, and it was Joshua who led the people across the Jordan River. His was a new generation and he commanded the people through years of brilliant military victories in central, southern, and northern Canaan. And he established fair and workable land allotments for the tribal settlements and set up governance. He took the wandering faithful of the Moses generation and made them into nations of the Joshua generation. It is the can-do generation, the build-on-the-vision generation. Some might say, the yes-we-can generation.

This phrase, Joshua Generation, is by no means unique to me. There is a Youth movement called The Joshua Generation. Their website says: “Gen X. Baby Buster. Millennials. These are names the world has given to our generation. But these names don’t define who we are. We are a generation who believes God will do what He (sic) said He would. We want to receive the promises God has made. We are willing to move beyond dead tradition and into the abundant life promised by Jesus. We are the Joshua Generation”

There is also the Joshua Generation Ministries, a global evangelical mission of prayer and teaching.

And President-elect Barack Obama not only named his campaign outreach to young people of faith, The Joshua Generation; he has used this phrase in several key speeches. Addressing the Selma Voting Rights Commemoration in Alabama last year, he explained, “Joshua had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. . . the torch was passed, to the Joshua Generation, to fulfill the promise of the early pioneers and lead the people into the promised land.’ . . . Joshua said, you know, I'm scared. I'm not sure that I am up to the challenge. The Lord said to him, every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon, I have given you. Be strong and have courage, for I am with you wherever you go. Be strong and have courage. It's a prayer for a journey.

Of course there are minefields in this mindset. It is all too easy to get caught in the immediate achievements and forget the bigger vision. Sen. Obama saw it as well:

“I worry” said Barack Obama, “that the Joshua generation in its success forgets where it came from. Thinks it doesn't have to make as many sacrifices. Thinks that the very height of ambition is to make as much money as you can, to drive the biggest car and have the biggest house and wear a Rolex watch . . . There's nothing wrong with making money, but if you know your history, then you know that there is a certain poverty of ambition involved in simply striving just for money. Materialism alone will not fulfill the possibilities of your existence. You have to fill that with something else. You have to fill it with the golden rule. You've got to fill it with thinking about others. And if we know our history, then we will understand that that is the highest mark of service.”

In his time, Joshua, too, worried. He saw his own people begin to covet the land and forget the greater vision of a Promised Land. The new nations began to reform their history as one of conquest and possession, rather than the story of how God gifted, granted, them a portion of the earth, and charged them to reclaim it in God’s name from foreign deities and steward it into abundance, peace, justice for us, into a realm according to God.

With his own time was running out, Joshua assembled the people of Israel, and put them on the spot. The Joshua Generation of the Bible was made to choose which gods they would follow. Would they serve the God who had led them from slavery to freedom? Would they serve the God who had taken them from being homeless refugees and provided them with a land to call their own?

Or would they worship other gods? Gods who would lead them to abandon the ways made known through the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Ways of peace, and justice, and mercy? Convenient gods of immediate gratification and power?

In his final address to the Israelites, Joshua reminded them of what could be accomplished with God at their side, and recalled the disasters that accompanied forgetting God, and forgetting who God called them to be. He challenged them: "Serve God in sincerity and faithfulness; put away the *false* gods that your ancestors served." This Promised Land would never be a Land of Promise, unless they chose the right God to follow. This was the decision with which THAT Joshua Generation had to grapple.

This Joshua Generation, our generation, has been given a decision to make, as well. Will we serve the old gods of self-interest and greed, whose cynical creeds continue to teach that it is every man for himself, even as we witness the ways that this approach has led to economic calamity and a widened gap between rich and poor? Will we hide our heads from the U.S. economy's a "crisis of faith" where the underlying causes are spiritual as well as financial? Or will we worship the God of abundant provision who encourages us to be people of generosity and sharing; who reminds us that you and I are our brother's and our sister's keeper, and they are ours?

Will we serve the old gods of racism, political divisiveness and intolerance? Or will we serve the God who breaks down the walls of hostility? Because even last week, as the world marveled at the giant step for inclusiveness coming from the voting booths across the nation, there was also tremendous sadness as anti-gay ballot measures passed in Arizona, Florida, Arkansas, and California. The old gods are not dead. There is work still ahead for the Joshua Generation -- to educate, organize, and reach across demographic divides to build new coalitions. It helps to remember that in 2000 a California anti-gay ballot measure passed by a 22% margin. Yesterday the margin was less than 5%-- Yesterday, nearly 5 million Californians stood up for marriage equality and put 5 million cracks in the wall of discrimination.

We have seen evidence of the Joshua Generation within our own denomination—

After all, Bruce Reyes-Chow was elected Moderator, a young, incredibly smart, gifted communicator; a techie in the best sense, potentially a unifier as well. Can we usher in a new era of hope and growth in the PC(U.S.A.) by voting for equality of ordination? Can we listen to the vision and aspirations of the Joshua Generation and together build a more perfect church and nation, founded on the principles of love, grace, and justice? Yes, I hope, by the grace of God, we can

Gandhi once said that we must be the change we want to see in the world. It is a good call to remember as we approach Stewardship Sunday. In two weeks those of you who are part of the church family will be asked for a financial pledge for 2009. We will be invited once again to become "living messages" of God's good news in an often hostile and resistant world. We are called to build a future rather than be stuck in fear or panic or anxiety.

Jesus once said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's." I do not think he was talking about separation of church and state. To the contrary, he said freely give to Caesar only what belongs to Caesar, only what allegiance and tax money that is required. And give God all that is left over, for God has claim on your ultimate allegiance and God will provide your ultimate abundance. The Joshua generation knows that God can work through our institutions as well as our intuitions and inspirations. One is not separate from another: Give your money to the government, but work to make sure it is well spent. Give your money to the church, then stick around to make sure we are building stronger faith, stronger community, stronger outreach,

stronger visions of what it means to be church. How we spend our money, is about our values -- Jesus' values as opposed to the values of the world.

Jesus values, as opposed to values of the world, have to do with loving God with all of our hearts and loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies and praying for those who do harm to us, cultivating purity of heart and gentleness of soul, making peace, not worrying about what we will eat or drink or what clothes we will wear, not storing up material treasures on earth but putting up spiritual treasures in heaven.

The liberation of the Hebrew people wasn't just a fight against the oppressor; it was also a fight against the oppressor in each of us. Joshua knew how important it was to own a part in transforming the world. He took the vision and promise of Moses and made it a reality, but only by constantly calling the Hebrew people to choose, again and again, to serve the One Holy God of Life. For us, for this Joshua generation, it means committing and recommitting ourselves to justice in every way possible. It means committing ourselves to peace in every possible way. And above all, it means committing ourselves to hope, in every possible way, believing that with God, all things are possible – and showing up for the hard work of making it so.

There will be days when the water seems wide and the journey too far, but in those moments, we must remember that throughout our history, there has been a running thread of ideals that have guided our travels and pushed us forward, even when they're just beyond our reach, liberty in the face of oppression, opportunity where there was none and hope over the most crushing despair. Those ideals and values beckon us still and when we have our doubts and our fears, just like Joshua did, when the road looks too long and it seems like we may lose our way,

Can we do it? Yes we can.

Amen