

WGUMC November 9, 2014 Joshua 24:1-5, 13-18, 25-26
"Joshua and the Job"

We've just had an election, but I'm not expecting the gridlock in our government to go away anytime soon. And that raises a few questions: Is any party able to govern? And are we willing to be governed?

Those questions must have been on the mind of old Joshua as he wrapped up his campaign of conquest in the land of Canaan. I imagine him looking back over his long career to the time when Moses first tapped him to be his successor. And successful he was, amazingly so, according to the book that bears his name. After Moses had led the people in the wilderness for forty years, Joshua was the new leader for a new time and ushered them into a new land.

In the preceding chapters, you'll read all about how Joshua rushes from one remarkable victory to another, though the fine print tells a somewhat more complicated story. Still,

Joshua comes to the end of his life, and things are looking good for the people of God.

But he must be thinking about how to consolidate these gains. So, to secure the land, he gives to each of the tribes (with the exception of the Levites) a piece of territory. But once they have settled in, what will keep them from fighting over land? After they have killed a lot of Canaanites, what will keep them from killing each other?

I don't envy Joshua trying to figure out how to keep all these squabbling tribes working together. Remember, they had no central government, no interstate highway system, not even a pro ball team. Really, the only thing they had to bring them all together was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That was enough.

So Joshua tells them that if they would just choose the God who had chosen them, they would be able to retain their inheritance. They would be able to stay in the land on which

they had not labored, live in the towns they had not built and eat the fruit of the trees they had not planted. [Joshua 24:13] But if they chose other gods, they would perish from the good land that God had given them. [23:16]

Given that choice, the people promised to serve the Lord. They made a covenant with God at Shechem [24:25] and for two hundred years after that, their confederation worked pretty well. Whenever they were needed, God would raise up spirit-filled leaders like Joshua. They were called Judges, and the tribes followed them, more or less, and the people served God, more or less.

But as time went on, the people began to want more. They wanted a government that would give them more security, more stability, and more legitimacy. What they wanted was a monarchy. But with the king, came the bureaucracy.

And that's how institutions are born. Just look at the history of the Methodist Church. We, too, started out as small tribes, called classes, working together. We, too, followed a spirit-filled leader. But eventually the Methodists wanted more. We wanted to be our own church and not just a reform movement within a church. And so, we too, eventually built a bureaucracy.

If you want to know what happens to bureaucracies, read the Bible. In the Old Testament, we get to witness the gradual destruction of the monarchy, first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians and the Persians, then by the Greeks and the Romans. By the time we get to the New Testament, the kingdom of Israel was as good as dead. Yet that dire political situation created the perfect spiritual conditions for a poor carpenter's son to be anointed Messiah by the Spirit and then to stand up in a synagogue in Nazareth and announce a new government, one that he would establish by leading a small

group of men and women into a radically different kind of kingdom.

That was then. This is now. Many are saying that we are seeing a similar situation unfolding in the church today. As in first century Palestine, we have been witnessing a similar process of disintegration, a slow collapse of institutions, a breakdown of bureaucracies.

On the national level, this process is irreversible. Do you remember 1958? That year, President Eisenhower laid the cornerstone for a 19-story building in New York City that would house the National Council of Churches and many denominational headquarters, including offices of the Methodist Church. The land was a gift from John D. Rockefeller, and the building was called the "Protestant Vatican on the Hudson," or simply, "the God Box." Thirty thousand people attended the opening in 1960. That was at the height of the ecumenical

movement and a time when mainline Protestant churches had numbers and influence.

But by 2013, the National Council of Churches, representing 37 Christian denominations, was nearly bankrupt and down to a handful of staff. They were forced to leave the God Box. Some now say that the ecumenical movement is dead and that mainline Protestantism is on life support. And you know what I say? That's fantastic! Because, just as in the first century, we in the 21st century now have near-perfect conditions for God to come down and do a radical new thing among us. [Isaiah 43:19] "Come, Lord Jesus!" [Rev 22:20]

The truth is that we need new leaders and a new paradigm of leadership. Joshua was the new leader for his time, and in our time, his question comes back to challenge us. Before we go scouting out this Post-Christian world we live in, before we make plans to enter this strange, new Promised Land, we have to consider whether we are going to serve the God of

Abraham, Moses, Joshua and Jesus—with all the hardship and self-sacrifice that implies—or are we going to serve the false gods around here, where money and power are in control and where the former owner of sex.com gets elected to public office! Only in Silicon Valley!

In this dangerous climate, we have been given a piece of land and a small space for grace in which to grow disciples of Jesus Christ. Like Joshua, we can look back to many successes over many years. And we have one this year as well. As of today, we will have taken in 30 new members so far this year: 17 youth and 13 adults! That's 30 reasons to celebrate. But if we are thinking like Joshua, we are thinking: what do we have to do to hold onto this gift and how do we grow it?

Twenty years ago, we would have answered that question by organizing a committee, planning a program, maybe even hiring staff, because that was the good bureaucratic way to get things done. But that way doesn't work so well today.

There are fewer people who can serve on committees, fewer hours in the day to plan programs, and fewer dollars to hire people to run them. Take it from me, the Chair of the Nominations, we are not waiting for a new committee. We are waiting for a spirit-filled leader to come and announce a new government, a new way of getting things done.

Still, at this time of year, I confess that I miss not having a worship committee and a stewardship committee, but I would rather have more spirit-filled leaders than more committees. So I was intrigued to find out that there is a group of men in this church that have dubbed themselves "men of action." This is an unofficial name for an unofficial group, but I have it on good intelligence that they do exist, though they don't have regular meetings. They don't elect officers, and they don't take minutes. But they do spend time together and care about each other. What's more, they care about the church. They have ideas. They want to get things done. And I, for one, am inclined to let

them. For in this post-Christian, post-bureaucratic world we live in, the Holy Spirit is calling on men and women of action, who like Joshua, will hear the challenge, take the risk, lead the charge, and use all their gifts to serve God and to secure the promise that has been given to all of us.

This is all kind of scary to those of us who were raised in the age of bureaucracy. We don't know what the church is going to look like in the years to come. But it's exciting, too. For if we choose to serve the Lord and we are faithful in that service, the future will look like God.

For now, Nominations is still looking for committee members. But we're also looking for spirit-filled leaders, who like me, "tremble on the edge of a maybe." [from Ted Loder's *Guerrillas of Grace*] It is a new thing that God is doing in churches today, and here in Willow Glen we can't yet see it or possibly predict the shape of it. But we can trust God to lead us into this new land of promise where there is a whole lot of

risk but much reward, where we will meet many strangers and experience a strange joy, where we will have to make radical changes and those changes will remake us. This new landscape of church will be very different and it will be very good, because we all had a choice, and we chose to serve God. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." [24:15]