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*We Are the Church: Be of good courage.
Hold fast to that which is good.*

Tim Hart-Andersen

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Joshua 1:1-9

The text we just heard recounts the conclusion of the Exodus, the foundational story of identity for Judaism. Moses leads the Israelites out of enslavement in Egypt into the wilderness for forty years, on their way to the Land of Promise. Jews around the world spent the last week remembering the Exodus during the Festival of Sukkot – and yesterday they awakened to the news of an attack on Israel. Let us pray – yet again – for peace for all the peoples in that region of the world.

In their wilderness sojourn the Hebrew people encountered hunger and thirst, doubt and rebellion, fear and anxiety, but through it all, Moses kept the faith. He followed the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. Moses was clearly an early adapter in using the cloud as a navigational system.

They finally reach the Jordan River, and the Land of Promise – I call it that because it should be a land of promise for all who live there – the Land of Promise is within sight. On Mt. Nebo, on the border between present day Jordan and Israel, Moses looks out over the Jordan Valley and the West Bank, sees the town of Jericho, that Joshua will take in his first conquest, and then up the hills on which the City of David will rise. And then he dies, leaving the people without a leader at a critical point in their journey.

But God has a succession plan.

“The LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying, “My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them.” (Joshua 1:1-2)

Transition in leadership can be challenging, and when it accompanies a risky new venture, it can be doubly difficult.

Now it’s Joshua’s turn to look out over the coming conquest of the land of other nations. I wonder if he senses that entering that land would be the start of unending geopolitical conflict still present today, much of it rooted in how this text has been understood and implemented. Joshua is overwhelmed by an uncertain and frightening future that lies ahead.

Did you hear how God prepares Joshua to cross the river? Three times God tells him to be “be of good courage.” *I will be with you. You are not alone. My word will go with you.*

Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. We’ve heard that line every Sunday in worship in the closing Charge and Benediction since I began serving this congregation. I often think of those words when I find myself facing some river over which I need to cross, knowing it will not be easy.

We are the church. We’re the ones who are of good courage. We’re those who hold fast to that which is good.

What is “good” courage? It’s the determination to stand for what is right and just and fair even when it’s hard. For Moses, and then Joshua, it meant holding fast to the law of God, not turning away from it. *Good* courage is the bravery that comes from unwavering commitment to

pursuing God's vision of a world built on kindness and justice and love, a world where all are respected, and hope does not disappear.

We all need courage like that at times in our lives. Any one of us can find ourselves facing situations that loom large and threatening, moments when we're not sure we can keep going. In those moments we can look for help beyond ourselves. To get through whatever we face, personally or together, we can remember that *it's not only up to us*. That's one of the gifts of faith: *we know we are not alone* as we seek courage to get through difficult circumstances beyond our control.

We hear that theme in our music today. The text for *The World Beloved* reminds us that God's love never leaves us. Bluegrass music sings of the strength from a power greater than our own that allows us to live through hard times.

I've made two Civil Rights pilgrimages through the south, and both times I came away astonished at the courage of the young people of that day... Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old Black girl walking alone through angry adults into an all-white school through a crowd of angry adults in New Orleans. ...Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat on the bus eight months before Rosa Parks did the same thing... The students who faced police dogs and water canon in Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham as they protested for their parents' right to vote...That is *good courage*.

Courage is evident in large and small ways in our time. The growth in the hospice movement is a sign of courage to face squarely the reality of the end of life. Teenagers seeking help for a mental health crisis – that takes courage. Those standing up to powerful interests to try to stop climate change are demonstrating *courage* on behalf of the

planet. Trans kids and their families who face bullying from school boards and politicians and yet refuse to back down are showing *good courage*.

As I think about the church and its future – and here I mean not only *this* church, but the Christian Church, and for that matter, all communities of faith – in coming decades we will need good courage in new ways, to hold fast to that which is good, because of future challenges we cannot yet even fathom – there are many, but I want to focus on one that may surprise my colleagues, knowing my limited knowledge of computers.

I'm thinking of the coming impact of Artificial Intelligence. I spent the summer reading about this; if you're not either fascinated by it or fearful of it, then you're not paying attention. The view from Mt. Nebo today looks out over a landscape that will soon be altered

by astonishing new technologies that will affect all of us in significant ways.

Some are comparing the coming of Artificial Intelligence to the discovery of electricity or humanity's harnessing of fire. After spending months with the developers of AI, Ross Andersen wrote recently in *The Atlantic* that the goal of artificial *general* intelligence, which goes far beyond the currently available AI, is "to summon a superintelligence into the world, an intellect superior to that of any human." (*The Atlantic*, September 2023, p. 54)

If we don't readily see the implications of this new technology for people of faith, it becomes apparent in listening to those engaged in developing it. One person working on superintelligence refers to it as "the final boss of humanity." (*The Atlantic*, September 2023, p. 66)

That sounds like religious language.

The Internet and our use of it *today* will seem quaint and naive in merely a few years. Changes in technology only recently predicted to be here around 2050 are now expected by 2026. Economies and social and political systems will face enormous upheaval in coming to terms with the power of AI. It is both hopeful and ominous.

The technologies that emerge over the next decade represent for people of faith a mid-21st century Jordan over which the human community will soon cross, not knowing where we are going. Will AI be a force that benefits or harms humanity? Will the new technologies help us cure disease and clean up the planet and learn to live together peaceably, or will they serve as new means of control that diminish human meaning and purpose, expand existing inequities, and lead to catastrophic uses?

On Mt. Nebo, God reminds Joshua and the Israelites they have reason to hope in the future because they take *good courage* with them as they cross into the unknown. This congregation has the chance to do the same – to step into the next chapter of its life with courage and hope, not knowing what lies ahead. I’m not referring to the short-term transition of a retiring senior pastor. I’m pointing to the much larger and more consequential challenge and opportunity to live into an as-yet undetermined future together.

That future will be shaped by technologies only now being developed that will have profound impact on systems that could move humanity in more just, equitable, and sustainable directions – or away from them. The Church and other people of faith and goodwill can and must play a part in determining a new course for the human community.

The word to Joshua and to people of faith everywhere and in every age is a word to which we, too, should listen as we cross a new Jordan into tomorrow, with the song of God's love in our hearts:

Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.