

Moses My Servant is Dead: Arise, Therefore ...

This sermon was delivered on April 29, 1979, by the Rev. Joseph R. Woody (1914-1999) at Massanutten Presbyterian Church, Shenandoah Presbytery, shortly after Rev. Woody announced his plans to retire. It is offered here, with the permission of Mr. Woody's family, as an example of a "leave-taking" message that departing pastors may use as they see fit.

Joshua 1:1-9

Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan ... Be strong and of a good courage, be not frightened nor dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

I have known that this day was coming – ever since I came to this pastorate at Massanutten. I have been praying that God would give me the message – the right words to say – for this moment in your lives and mine. And I convinced that God has given me right Word for this hour.

I think you would be interested in knowing just how this Word of God came to me. Last Sunday afternoon, a goodly group of you accompanied me in our monthly ministry to our friends at Liberty House Nursing Home. When the service was over, and we were greeting the residents who attended, I spoke to one lady in her 80's who showed me her Bible, a well-used, well-worn volume. She opened her Bible to Joshua, Chapter 1 – and pointed to a marked, much-read verse:

"Be strong and of a good courage, be not frightened nor dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

If I were to say no more than this, it would be an adequate message.

But, like all Biblical texts, its full meaning can only be found by studying it in its context. The first thing this context says to us is:

I. "Moses my servant is dead."

There comes a time in the life of God's people in any place when their leader passes on. "Moses my servant is dead" – or the minister is leaving, the minister is going to retire.

I feel in some ways like Moses. God has allowed me to lead you his people through an important period in your life as a Christian congregation.

Seven years ago this month, at your invitation, even before moving to this pastorate, I sat with you in that last congregational meeting held in the old church building prior to my assuming this pastorate. You had met to consider letting the contract to

build this sanctuary and church plant. It seemed that some of you were uncertain and few a bit fearful. I was asked to speak. I did so, challenging you to what I called a "Venture of Faith."

The years have passed and that once sizeable building debt has been reduced and almost liquidated. I have had occasion again and again to join you in thanksgiving for God's grace of liberality poured out on our people.

God has allowed me, like he allowed Moses of old, to lead you – I firmly believe – to the borders of a Promised Land; to that time and place in the history of Massanutten Presbyterian Church, when you have before you much larger usefulness and greater blessing than has been yours in the past.

In the words God said to the Church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-8) a thousand years later, so I believe he now speaks to you:

"And to the angel of the Church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, and shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut ...'"

But, for you to enter that "open door," that "promised land," it is necessary that Moses die!

"What do you mean?"

"Hadn't Moses already died when God spoke the People of Israel through Joshua?"

Yes – and no!

Like John Brown's body, the soul of Moses tends to go marching on! While Moses was alive, during that 40 years in the wilderness, with its countless hardships, there had been many among that congregation who wished him dead! – and some who would even have killed him.

But now that he *was* dead, and a new leader had been raised up by God, there were some who wished Moses would come back and take over.

There is an old saying: "A pastor pleases all the congregation at some time or other. He pleases some when he comes. He pleases others while he's there, and he pleases the rest when he leaves!"

I firmly believe God's message to you, Christians of Massanutten Presbyterian Church, is this: Let Moses die! Let Joe Woody pass out of your congregation's life!

A Christian minister is but God's servant, by whom you have come to believe and to grow in the faith. He is dispensable!

Like parents, the day comes when a retiring pastor should no longer control or be influential in the lives of his growing children.

Because some congregations don't want to accept the fact that an ex-pastor is no longer their pastor;

Because some pastors don't want to accept the fact that they are no longer pastors of the church they have left –

Much hardship is wrought on the new pastoral relationship, because his congregation will not let the former pastor and his ways die in their hearts.

It is for this reason that many Presbyteries, including ours, have adopted statements of Ministerial Ethics, as a guide to ministers and congregations when a minister retires or moves on.

Shenandoah Presbytery's Statement of Ministerial Ethics (on when a Ministers Retires or Moves to Another Pastorate) sets forth guidelines for the conduct of the congregation, the retiring minister, and the new minister.

It becomes my duty to see that these guidelines are made known to you. I have given copies to each member of the Session. Other copies are available for other church leaders, and may be had from the Clerk of Session. A copy will be posted on the church bulletin board.

Let me suggest that you familiarize yourselves thoroughly with the congregation's responsibilities, and be aware of the conduct expected of your old and your new minister.

My part, as I see it, is to encourage you to make, for the new Pastor God will send, hearts open for this love and minds ready to understand and follow you where he would lead you.

But in order that your hearts and minds may be ready for God's new minister, you should do two things, it seems to me:

1) If you have loved and respected the minister God now calls away, thank God for him and his ministry among you, then gently but firmly close the door of his pastorate among you. That means that -

After your new pastor arrives, your old pastor will accept no invitations to conduct weddings, or funerals, or similar ministries – unless invited by your new pastor ---- and then only in exceptional circumstances.

So! if you want a child baptized, a marriage celebrated, or even your funeral conducted by me, you have just four months

Close the door on my ministry among you gently but firmly! Please!

2) There is a second and more difficult thing I now request some of you to do:

If you are one of those who have been dissatisfied with my ministry, or, even more important, who have felt yourselves offended by me, either as minister or as an individual, then help me heal our relationship while there is still time.

During my pastorate here I have, on a few occasions, sought out a member to ask forgiveness when it seemed I had caused offense.

I ask your help for my sake, for your sake, for the church's sake, for the new pastor's sake.

Jesus says (Matt 5:23):

"If you are offering your gift at the altar and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift."

For, my brethren, if we part – and do not part friends – every relationship you will ever have with a pastor in the future will be colored by this relationship with your present pastor which you have not allowed God to heal.

As for me, I will seek out, in the days I am still with you, any of you I feel may have something against me – and offer my sincere apology.

Perhaps this article I read recently will help you see the importance of reconciliation with your pastors, both present and future ones. This article, a bit on the light side, contains some truth.

"There is a chain letter going around among the churches these days in which no cost is involved. You just send a copy of the letter to six other churches that are tired of their ministers. Then you bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the bottom of the list. In one week, you will receive 16,436 ministers and one of them should be a dandy! But beware – one church broke the chain, and got their old minister back!"

A bit facetious, perhaps!

But not so funny when you realize that, if you have been able to live in a loving, giving, and forgiving relationship with your present pastor, what assurance can you have that you will be able to be loving and forgiving to your new pastor?

II. The Lord said to Joshua, Moses' servant: Arise, go over this Jordan.

For every Moses, there is God's Joshua.

No minister is indispensable; God always has his new servant ready when his old servant passes on.

I want to say a few words which I hope may help prepare the way of my successor, and help to make his pastorate a happy and fruitful one.

Remember that you the congregation have more to do with the success of a pastorate than you may realize.

You here are a congregation of which I have been very proud, and for which I have been most grateful.

You'd be surprised how frequently I boast of you to people outside our church. Just his past week I met a fine minister of the Mennonite Church, recently retired. We talked about each other's work. I found myself saying that my congregation at Massanutten has given me more than I have ever given them. I said to him that, just to stand in the pulpit of a Sunday morning and look out into your faces is a constant joy and blessing to me. "Like priest, like people" is a saying that works both ways.

I covet for my successor in this church the love and respect, prayerful support and forgiveness for his human failings you as a congregation have so abundantly given me.

"Moses" is dead! God's "Joshua," though unknown to you, is being readied. Remember he is God's man – but a man! Find in any imperfections he may have, something you both have in common – and love him for being so like you!

Look for the marks of Christ on his life – and seek to be through worthy yourselves of bearing such brands of slavery to Christ.

Pray for him constantly, for in so doing you pray for your own spiritual welfare. Above all, follow him with faith and step out with him in courage when he calls you to Christ's service!

Pray that God will lead you to your "Joshua" and your "Joshua" to you.

Prepare your hearts to follow his leadership.

III. Finally, then, follow your new pastor with faith and courage.

I am convinced by God's Spirit that Massanutten Presbyterian Church stands at the threshold of a greatly enlarged ministry to people in the name of Christ. You only need to take a short ride of 5 miles, east or west, north or south, to see the steadily expanding population of east Rockingham County. I know that some would like to hold onto this present pleasant valley, like some of our ancestors sought to hold on

to the valley as it was in their time. Of course, this is impossible. The clock cannot be stopped! And for true Christians, it should be undesirable. We are those whom Christ sends out to meet the world. Just as we should rejoice when we go out to meet people for Christ, so we should rejoice when people come to us. And we should share with them – gladly – this valley that is not “our” valley, but God’s, of which we are only stewards.

Three thousand years ago, the Lord led Moses up onto a high mountain, Mt. Pisgah, east of Jericho, and showed him all the land we call Palestine today. And he gave to Joshua, Moses’s minister, a promise:

“Every place that the sole of your feet will tread upon, I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. “

Dear friends, God places before this church a land of promise. But we will possess these blessings only as we step out on the promises of God. God’s promise is only for those who will obey with faith and courage. Only when we step forward in faith does the land become ours!

Three times in these short verses God speaks through Joshua, each time calling his people to courageous obedience.

vs. 6: “Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.”

vs. 7 “Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commended you ...”

vs. 9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened neither be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Your victories in the future will be the victories of courageous faith. The evidence of such faith is obedience to God’s commission.

Note: the passage begins, “Moses my servant is dead.” It ends, “The Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Pastors come and pastors go – but the Lord God never forsakes His people. He is with you wherever you go in obedience! March confidently into the future – God’s future – your future!

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