

“FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE”

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18; Matthew 25:1-13

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At the end of the book of Joshua, our scripture reading this morning, the people of Israel had finally come into the land that had been promised to them almost a century before when God led them out of slavery in Egypt. Part of the journey had been peaceful; part of it violent. Whole generations had lived and died between the first frail hope of a rag-tag group of slaves set out through the Red Sea and this day. And now Joshua, successor to Moses, assembled all of the people together and asked them to renew their covenant with the God who had brought them to this place.

Can you imagine the wonder of that assembly? I would guess that there were tears and shouts of joy, and the dazed far-off looks of the many who never believed that they would live to see this day. It had been longed for, hoped for, worked for, fought for—but still to have accomplished so large a victory in their dream of freedom and security, it could not have been less than overwhelming.

So now, we are here, began Joshua. We are here in this new geographical, intellectual, and spiritual place, and you will be tempted to forget what you have come through. You will be tempted to forget the lessons you have learned. You will be tempted to forget who and what brought you here. So renew your covenant now: decide again “for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Last Tuesday night, all Americans, no matter how we voted, were privileged to be part of a historic moment. A man of African-American descent was elected President of these United States. An African-American family will be the most public face of our nation. A person of color will preside over the government of this people. No, this does not mean that the war against racism in America is won, but it is an enormous real and symbolic step forward. So I hope, no matter what your political leanings, you agree with John McCain that this election was a great moment, not only for President-elect Obama, but also for this nation. Who would have believed that out of the evil of slavery, the violence of civil war, the long slow work for change—for civil rights and voting rights and equal opportunity—we would have come to this place? As I watched the sea of faces of those gathered at Grant Park, Chicago, and elsewhere around the country last Tuesday night, I thought I could have been looking at the Israelites gathered with Joshua at Shechem thousands of years ago. Things really are different. This is a milestone of change. From this new place, we decide how to go forward.

I have been thinking a lot about change this week, how it happens. When we commit ourselves to changing what we perceive to be wrong, what we want is for that change to proceed like watching our children grow: every year a taller mark on the yardstick, new evidence of accomplishment attained. But mostly change doesn't work like that. It can rarely be plotted as a linear, orderly, and visible movement. Instead, in circumstance after circumstance, change appears as long periods of work that seem to be going nowhere, or false starts, and only infrequent small victories until some unexpected moment of history allows the breakthrough to new ground. The work of changing minds, attitudes, deeply-held beliefs, laws: it is cruelly slow, requiring courage, and passion, but really mostly perseverance in the face of obstacle, and set-back, and no discernible movement forward.

I think of my father, born in 1917. He grew up in the South taking racial segregation and all its attendant assumptions as simply the way things were. But somewhere in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, he changed. His intellect told him that his inherited view of the way things were was wrong, and he began to struggle against the prejudice of his heart. I was a junior in high school when he talked with me about his internal war. I remember because it was the first time I saw my father as a person capable of change rather than a static being. Most of us underestimate our parents that way until we grow older. My father only shared with me a fraction of what it was like to review and undo the social and intellectual expectations of the first 40 years of his life; it wasn't something he made a lot of noise about. He didn't go out and become a civil rights activist; he simply changed his mind and his behavior. There is a lot about transformational movement that is like that, not the zeal and work of the reformers themselves, but the quiet wrestlings of individual after individual, mostly invisible: change indiscernible until some moment demands a stand, and only then, we find the line has moved.

A line moved last Tuesday night, and we will not know for a while yet what that movement means in the history of our country or our world. But two things at least are clear to me. First, as I saw the tears of mingled joy and struggle remembered wet the faces of so many—not just African-Americans, but people of a wide spectrum of color and profession and socio-economic status, and as I listened to John McCain's exceedingly gracious concession speech, I felt a surge of hope. Real hope—what the poet Emily Dickenson called “that thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.” The feathered bird of my soul sang to me Tuesday night louder than she has sung in a very long time. She sang that those who care can work together beyond their differences to change the world; she sang that in a world increasingly suspicious and divided by race, and religion, and clan loyalty, it doesn't always have to be like this. It doesn't have to be like this. The world can be different and we can be different. That is the song of hope. And as I hear it, I hear in the background of my mind, Joshua's call to the people of Israel: in this moment when a great work has been accomplished, it is not the time to become complacent, to say we are done, but instead to recommit ourselves to hope, which is to recommit ourselves to the work ahead. In the language of his time, he said, “For me and my house, we will serve the Lord,” but what that meant was that he and his would not forget that they, Israel, were once a slave people; going forward they would continue to care about the oppressed and do the work of justice. They would protect the stranger in their midst and the sojourners among them. They would serve the Lord by continuing in God's ways instead of seeking other gods and other priorities.

If we allow ourselves to hope and recommit ourselves to that hope, there is a work that lies ahead of us: to participate in any of a hundred or thousand ways in establishing not just a community or a nation, but a world of justice and safety for all. I know. It's a huge commission, but both hope and realism demand no less. This work will not be easy. It will certainly not be fast. All of us here might labor for our piece of it all of our lives without seeing any positive change that could come, us and our children as well. Change is like that. It took almost 100 years for the children of Israel to move from slavery to their promised land. In 1696, the first anti-slavery tract was published in the new world by radical Quakers in Philadelphia. It has taken almost 300 years to come here from there: generation after generation, always some faithful ones pushing, pushing, making the argument, changing minds one by one, and from time to time, a previously immovable line moving and a new phase of struggle begun.

Now I realize this is supposed to be a stewardship sermon today. My job is to talk to you about why I and you should support the church. And that connects with what I've said up till now in this way: we of the Congregational tradition, we have almost 400 years invested in trying to change the face of society to better serve God and all God's people from the "cittie on the hill" of the Massachusetts Bay colony through a distinguished list of abolitionists, emancipationists, educators and civil rights activists, through settlement house workers toiling with immigrants in urban slums, down to concerns for contemporary refugee populations and the right of marriage for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. In our particular church, First Congregational Church, now United Church of Christ, in Corvallis, we have a 125 year tradition of working to take the best of our intellects and the best of our faith out into the world in a variety of paths of faithful service. Over the past weeks, I have read volumes and volumes of old church records, and I have more than once been profoundly moved by the faith and actions of those who have gone before us in this place.

My point is this: God calls us to the work of change, and the way to significant change is long, perilous, and often frustrating and disappointing. If you know ahead of time that the work may be hard and you may never see the results of your labor, then you're best off working not alone. You need friends of the spirit: those who will challenge you, those who will both celebrate and grieve with you, those who will keep you going when you want to quit. For me, and I hope for you, that community of friends is the church. For myself, I have chosen to love and serve the Lord in this place: to give my work, and whatever gifts I have to bring to that work, to give my money that rabble might continue to be roused, that arguments might be made, that minds might be changed, and lines move. I choose through the church to work for the day that people once oppressed might rejoice with tears streaming down their faces. And slowly, slowly, through the movement of too many generations—we and our children's children, and our children's children's children's children—through the work of our hands and the work of our faith, we might bring the world truly closer to God's holy and gracious shalom. That's why I support the church. How about you? Thanks be to God. Amen.