

“Looking Back, Stepping Forward”

Oct 25th, 2020 (Covid 32 – Live Stream 8)
Joshua 3: 1-4; 14- 16, Joshua 4: 1-7

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Today we celebrate the 192nd anniversary of this church. Anniversaries and birthdays are always mini-thresholds, where we look back to the past and look ahead to the future. In the story of Joshua, the crossing of the Jordan River speaks of standing on that threshold between the old and the new. This is a story that gives meaning to times of transition, which is why it has profound meaning for us today.

First, we look back. After the Israelites had crossed the Jordan river, someone from each tribe was instructed to go back into the Jordan and pick out a stone to make a monument. Why? So that when children and future generations asked about the stones, they would hear the story, and remember how God had been with them and had led them across the river. Before moving on, they stopped and looked back and gave thanks.

Remembering our past is so very important. In fact, that's the reason this church produced a history book. The title of that book: *The Meaning of These Stones*, comes right out of this scripture reading from Joshua 4. It's a wonderful book and I find myself regularly referencing it, especially now that my living history book, my father, has passed away. The book is a great way to see the history and the changes.

This church has changed so much physically. The first sanctuary was in what we call the lower hall by the kitchen. It then moved up into Heritage Hall, and later into this beautiful historic sanctuary where we still worship today. Next came the gymnasium, office space, and other important updates; like adding an elevator.

The changes have also been in style and in culture. In 1919, after the First World War, George St. Methodist church joined this church.



The George Street Methodist building no longer stands, but it was the fourth church on the square and was kiddy-corner to Wall Street. That amalgamation changed the culture somewhat, as George Street was an Episcopalian Methodist church and this was a Wesleyan Methodist.

But an even greater change in culture came only a few years later in 1925 when Methodists, Congregationalists and 2/3rds of the Presbyterian churches in Canada came together to form the United Church of Canada.

In Brockville the Methodists were very eager to enter into Union, though the odd person grumbled: "*A Methodist I was born; a Methodist I will die!*" St. John's Presbyterian voted to join church union. It was First Presbyterian on the other side of the Courthouse that was the most divided. In the end, 200 members left First Presbyterian to become members of the United Church, 150 of whom walked across the Courthouse Green one Sunday morning to join Wall Street, including their minister, Rev. Dr. Robert MacInnes Hamilton. He joined Rev. Frank Wooton in ministry here.

Interestingly, across Canada, almost all of the Presbyterian ministers entered into Union, and 2/3rd of their members as well, so you can imagine what a devastating blow this was to those who decided to remain Presbyterian.

5 years ago, when the United Church of Canada was celebrating its 90th anniversary, the national church asked us to ring our church bells 90 times. We don't have church bells, so I asked the Presbyterians to ring their bells 90 times ... in honour of the Union that 90 years ago was very painful to them. It was so very meaningful that *they did ring their bells 90 times to celebrate us!* So very much has changed in this church and in the Canadian landscape. We give God thanks for the rich history.

In the story of Joshua, creating a memorial to the past happens right as they enter the new land. But I want you to notice that while they stop and mark the occasion and remember how God had been with them in the past, they don't stop for long, they keep going and moving forward into the new land.

I love the little verse in chapter 3. Just before they cross over, the leaders are going throughout the camp, telling the people: "*When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests carrying it, move out from your places and follow. That way you will know the way to go, since you have never been this way before.*"

My dad told a great story when he preached a sermon for the closing of the Bay of Quinte Conference 2 years ago this week. The story is about Albert Einstein. Albert Einstein was an amazing physicist and mathematician and he was chosen in 1999 by Time magazine to be the Man of the Century – not the year – but of the entire 20th century. Although he was totally, almost unbelievably, brilliant, Einstein was apparently directionally challenged. Not a lot of people are aware of it, but he actually could get lost finding his way back to his home in Princeton, New Jersey. Neighbours there got used to helping him find his way.

The story on this occasion is about a time that Albert Einstein was traveling by train. The conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of the passengers. When he came to Einstein, the great man reached into his vest pocket, but couldn't find his ticket. He started going through all his pockets – it wasn't there. He looked into his briefcase – no luck. He looked between the seats. He just couldn't find his ticket. The friendly conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm certain that you bought a ticket. It's all right. Please, don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively.

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was about to move on to the next car, he looked back and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his lost ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, please don't worry. We know who you are. There is no problem. Please don't worry about your ticket." Einstein stood up, brushed himself off, and said, "Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going!"

What about us? Do we know where we're going? We have been moving and are still moving into uncharted territory. For all sorts of reasons many believe that the church is in the midst of a once-in-every 500 years - massive shift.

In some ways I believe that the biggest changes to this church have happened since the history book was published. This book was finished in the mid '90's. So much has changed since then, partly because the world was changing rapidly at that time. I remember in the mid 90's going to a workshop while I was in seminary on "*how the internet works!*" The speed of change in the last 25 years has been exponential.

At the same time, the wider mainline church has seen more change; and by change, I mean decline. It didn't start in the 90's. Actually the history book notices that even in the 1960's Wall Street began to see decline. The Boomer generation who packed the Sunday Schools in the 50's and 60's

largely stopped attending when they became adults. Their kids, the Millennials, hardly went to church at all, and now the millennials are having kids and for many it's their great-grandparents who are or were faithful church attenders.

Many churches and denominations won't survive this massive shift. I don't know what the odds are of the United Church of Canada (or this church in particular) surviving the shift. But I do know that we need to keep being the church and to keep walking forward. We need to hear God's call and step out in faith to make a difference.

I'll tell you something: the next 10-20 years will be critical. I believe that, for those of you who grew up in the church and faithfully attend, your bequests and legacy gifts to the church might well be what carries us over into the new land. I think it will get worse before it gets better again, and that for the ministry of this church to carry on to new generations, we will need you who love the church to prayerfully consider placing the church in your will.

What is our call? Our call is to reach out to the broken, the lost and lonely with the transforming love of Jesus. Oh my, the need is so great. The need is so great.



This week I was shaken to learn of the death of Dexter Roberts. Dexter was my age, just a year older. We were at the same school and he was an organist here for a while. Dexter was such a bright light. He was so talented and so smart and so full of life.

Now it's probably been 20 or 25 years since I last saw Dexter, and it turns out that in those 25 years, he had a lot of struggles. He struggled with depression and mental health; he was gay and ended up contracting HIV which meant he was stigmatized on multiple levels. He was also black, and we are becoming more and more aware of just how much racism there is under the surface and increasingly overtly. Dexter even ended up homeless for a short while at one point and slept under a bridge in Toronto.

Through all of this he kept coming back and overcoming and trying to make a difference for others. He wrote an article about how he ended up homeless and I tell you — it is sobering. It certainly makes me look at homeless people differently. In 2010 Dexter received a Transforming Lives Award for overcoming his mental health issues from the Canadian Addiction and Mental Health hospital in Toronto.



If you have internet access take a look at this video:

https://youtu.be/U_AaU5XAawA.

He also wrote a very moving article. What a courageous man to share his struggle and pain so publicly.

We know that depression and anxiety rates have skyrocketed during the pandemic, along with relapse and overdose rates having increased by 30%. The world needs a church with hard feet and soft hearts to go into the darkness and bring a healing and a hope and a life that only Jesus can offer.

I believe this church has a calling to make a difference to broken people. I'm not talking about shiny-happy church people saving those poor bums who have messed-up lives. What I love about this church is that it's full of broken people. We are people who are more and more aware and willing to share our own struggles and brokenness — and that makes such a difference.

I don't exactly know how to be the church in this new world where hurting people don't turn to the church – often they run from the church because the church has been part of the hurt. I don't know. But Jesus, whom I have given my life to, does know.

We are called to follow the Ark of God. The Ark was the presence of God. As we keep our eyes on Jesus, the fullest presence of God; we will be able to walk through the waters — “*Out of the depths and beyond the walls*” as our banners proclaim. Let us rise as the church, and follow Jesus out to bring life, healing and hope to many.

Thanks be to God.