

* * * * *
GOD WITH US Michael B. Beough
Joshua 1:1-9 June 13, 2008
* * * * *

Richard Byrd alone at an outpost in Antarctica: "The universe is not dead. Therefore, there is an Intelligence there, and it is all pervading The human race, then, is not alone in the universe. Though I am cut off from human beings, I am not alone."

Our sixth Bedrock Belief says we are not alone. "God is always with us." I call this one of our "unshakeable anchors." It holds us steady in the storms of life. It is a non-negotiable foundation that we fall back on in times of fear and stress. The Bible makes this one of its strongest messages. It appears in many places, especially throughout the Psalms. One of my favorite psalms is 139. The psalmist asks – *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.* The answer: *Nowhere!* God never abandons us unless we first abandon God. If we abandon God, it will always seem that he has abandoned us.

We can take great comfort in knowing God is always with us. But the God of the Bible does not promise his presence merely to give us **comfort**. The God of the Bible promises his presence to give us the **courage** to go forth in pursuit of a great mission.

In Joshua 1:1-9, God gives Joshua a great mission. God commissions him to go conquer a land, to take over a territory. It is the land God had initially given to Abraham back in the book of Genesis. Joshua's job is to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan River to claim all the land west of the Jordan all the way to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and south to the deserts of the Arabian peninsula and north to the Euphrates River. No small task. To get Joshua moving, God says to him, "I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." "The Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Our Bedrock Belief points us toward God's great mission for us. As Christians, we are missional people. We are a missional church. God has great things for us to do. This Bedrock Belief comes into play when we set out to do God's great mission for us. We have been asking as a congregation, **"What is our mission?"** We have been encouraging each other to ask, "What is my mission?" That is a dangerous question because God's mission is always a BIG mission. It is always bigger than anything we can do on our own. It almost always seems impossible.

Based on Joshua, let's think of our mission in terms of what God wants us to conquer. Certainly not someone else's land. But what about darkness, ignorance, spiritual emptiness, laziness? These are things God certainly wants us to conquer.

Perhaps our first mission is conquering these in ourselves. That would be huge if any part of our heart-territory is under the control of the Prince of Darkness.

And then God commissions every one of us to go change the world. God's primary strategy is to send us to make and grow disciples of Jesus Christ who give their lives to make a difference in the world.

Let's think of it this way. Disciples work to elevate the quality of life all around them. They serve the needs of others. They go where there is human need and get their hands dirty. But more than anything else, disciples want others to know the life-changing relationship they can have with Jesus Christ. So they disciple others to follow Jesus so they too will work to elevate the quality of life all around them and disciple others to follow Jesus, so on and so forth until Jesus comes again and we can all rest from our labors.

Our mission is nothing less than changing the world by touching the hearts of others with the grace, love, and justice of Jesus Christ. Is that big enough for you? No wonder God promises never to forsake us. Otherwise, we would never get to first base. We would never take the first step.

So God gives us a big mission, and then promises to give us the strength and courage we need to make our mission happen.

God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. Otherwise, forget it! This is so important that God mentions strength and courage three times, in verses 6, 7, and 9.

God's mission always requires strength and courage. I believe God means the strength and courage of our convictions.

We are up against some pretty strong adversaries. The most obvious for me are fear, temptation, diversion. These are not easy to overcome. The Prince of Darkness never tires of filling our minds with all the reasons why we shouldn't or can't do something mighty for God and for His world.

For the past four years, I have been on the Evangelism Committee of our Presbytery. Our goal is to encourage and motivate our Presbyterian churches to share their faith with others and make new disciples of Jesus Christ. After four years of planning and programming, we are still talking about how afraid Presbyterians are about sharing their faith. It is no wonder our denomination is shrinking. It is no wonder the percentage of Christians in the U.S. is declining. We are afraid to speak of the One who has the power to change lives and transform our world. Why wouldn't we want to share the news of the transforming power of Jesus Christ if we really believe that is our mission and if that is really happening in us?

While we sit around at our Committee meetings bemoaning the lack of faith sharing, thank goodness there are others who with strength and courage are stepping out to make a difference by sharing Jesus Christ.

In another bit of lurking at Starbucks last week, I overheard a conversation happening at a nearby table. A young adult man was doing most of the talking. He was talking to a teenage boy with what appeared to be his mother sitting with them. Their conversation started about the time I sat down with my frappeccino, and it ended almost two hours later.

It was obviously an arranged meeting, perhaps the mother inviting the man to talk with her son. The best I could figure out, the teenager's life was in a mess. I couldn't hear everything. But there were lot's of issues. Then I heard the man sharing his faith story and telling the teenager that Jesus Christ was the answer for what was going on his life. He invited the teenager to invite Jesus into his heart, and before they left, the man had gotten a commitment from the teenager to come to the youth worship at his church. He promised to introduce him to other youth who were committed to Jesus and making a change in their lives.

The whole time I was thinking, "Would I have the courage to do what that young man was doing? How many times have I failed to say to a troubled teenager that the answer to what they are dealing with is Jesus Christ?"

God tells Joshua to be strong and have courage. God also tells him that courage is not enough. To reach success, he must play by the rules. He must know and obey God's Word.

Now here is what I think God is saying to Joshua. "I promise to be with you wherever you go. The way in which I am with you is through the words I have given you." God is talking about scriptures, the Bible. "Meditate on my word day and night," God tells Joshua, "so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it."

You see, our Bedrock Belief is not a mere sentiment or vague spiritualism. Almost everyone believes there is a spiritual presence of some sort in the world.

Our Bedrock Belief, however, refers to a specific God who is present with us in His written and proclaimed Word. We know this God through His Word. We cannot know Him apart from this word. It is amazing how many people claim to know God and even what God is thinking and yet seldom open these pages.

The God we know is always with us every time we pick up the Bible and set out to read it. In these pages, God gives us a moral basis for life through His Word. God directs our ways through His Word. God redeems us

through His Word. The more we get to know this God through His Word, and obey Him, the greater will be our success in our life's mission.

God tells Joshua to surrender his life to God's Word. But here's the bottom line for us. God's Word leads us, not to some dry and dusty ancient ideas that we might argue over, but to a living relationship with a person. That person is Jesus Christ. The New Testament invites us to turn our lives over to Jesus, to surrender ourselves to God's Living Word.

Let me tell you what happens when we do that. We become a new creation. It is one thing to believe benignly that God is with us like a lucky charm on a chain. It is something else to experience the realignment of our spiritual molecules as God empowers us to make a life-altering difference in the world.

Do you know anyone who is missing the grandest adventure any life can have? Maybe you know someone right now whose life is crashing. You need to tell that person that there is a way out. "Surrender to God's Word. Turn your life over to Jesus. Your life will become a success in all the ways that really matter."

Oswald Chambers says that living the worthy and excellent life in the midst of the realities of life takes a tremendous amount of discipline. When it seems there is no one or nothing to help you, remember God's assurance to us, "I will never forsake you." Or as our Bedrock Belief puts it, "God is always with us." "If we take this view," Oswald says, "life will become one great romance – a glorious opportunity of seeing wonderful things all the time."