

Sermon: No More Manna  
Text: Joshua 1:1-9  
Date: August 21, 2016  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'*

### Joshua 1:9

For those of you who are worshiping with us here today for the very first time, let me first say, welcome. We are very glad you're here with this morning.

Let me also catch up on where we are today. In June we launched a summer sermon series focused on some of the big stories of what we Christian folk call the Old Testament. We looked at the two stories of creation in Genesis – it's true, there are two, one in Gen. 1 and a totally different one in Gen. 2.

We looked at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, of Noah and the Ark, Moses and the burning bush. And last week my colleague Jamie Dale and his wife Anne gave us a wonderful look at the story of Manna in the wilderness.

We're going to bring this series to a close next Sunday with the story of David and Goliath.

But today's story marks its own kind of close. It brings us to the end of one of the big overarching story lines of the Old Testament, and it deposits us on the cusp of a new beginning, a whole new historical chapter, in the life of the Hebrew people.

The first five books of the Hebrew bible are called the Torah, or the law. For non-Jews that title can be a little confusing because while these books do contain laws and commandments, they contain other things too.

Mainly the Torah consists of these big stories that I just mentioned. Together these individual stories tell a larger story, the narrative version of how the Hebrews emerged from the mists of primordial history to become a distinct people group, with their own unique identity.

This overarching narrative culminates with the Exodus, the story of how Moses liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and led them on their long journey through the wilderness, to the promised land.

And now this long chapter of their history is about to come to an end. That we are at this shift is made clear in the first ten words of the book of Joshua: *After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord.*

This is not just an introduction to a new story. It turns out that this phrase is significant. It marks one of the earliest examples in all of literature of what the American scholar and mythologist Joseph Campbell has deemed the Heroes' Journey.

It's a pattern that repeats over and over throughout the world's literature in which a great leader or mentor must first die, in order for a young hero or heroine to emerge on his or her own.

Just to cite a couple of familiar examples from pop culture, think Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker, or Dumbledore and Harry Potter, or Jesus and the disciples.

Fine you say, but what does this hero's journey have to do with me? Well, everything in a way.

For you students, it's why that moment when your mom or dad or your parents together drop you off at college and say good-bye is so essential, why it's so significant, and why it can be so hard.

Mind you, one hopes that their leave taking was more straightforward and less dramatic than when Severus Snape performed the *avada kedavra* curse on Albus Dumbledore! And the happy news is that most of you will probably see your parents again at the winter break, if not before then.

But you're on your own now. Ready to embark on your own journey. Yours may or may not be a hero's journey, per se, but leaving home is the first big step on your way to living a fully independent life as an adult.

For most of us, it's a scary moment. I saw an article just this morning, in today's New York Times, that documents how anxiety about whether you're going to fit in and find friends and succeed in the classroom is an almost universal experience for first-year students.

So if that's what you're feeling right now, heed the words of our text for this morning: *Be strong and take courage!* And know that what you're feeling is completely normal.

These kinds of transitions – from what's known and familiar to something new, where the landscape is unfamiliar and the outcome are unknown – these are always anxiety producing.

That's true whether you're a first year student or whether you've been out on your own traveling through life's wilderness for the last forty years.

It's why this text repeats the admonition to be strong and have courage five times, because we all need to be reminded not to be afraid of new things.

But there's more to the process of finding our own unique identity than stepping out on one's own.

Yes, in the hero's journey, the mentor figure has to disappear from the scene, but it's up to us to take the next step after that, to cross the threshold we're now standing on.

Because crossing thresholds is the other essential and universal part of reaching our own promised land, of becoming who we are. And that's maybe the scariest part of all.

Ask Morgana Bailey. For most of her life, Morgana was an ordinary, outgoing kid, happy to be growing up on the plains of Kansas. She was popular in school, successful in the classroom and involved in all sorts of activities outside of it.

Until one day she finally had to acknowledge that she was not like her friends. She had to step out of the shadow of her parents who had raised her so lovingly. To be honest, my guess is that as a young woman living in Kansas, she also had to step out of the shadow of the church she grew up in, a church which most likely did not accept her for who she was.

If she was going to *be herself*, she had to step across a threshold, and enter this new unfamiliar territory *by herself*. Except that she didn't.

Instead of taking that step, she turned around and headed in the other direction. She found a nice, safe hiding place, worthy of Harry Potter's cupboard under the stairs – only she chose to be there – and she stayed locked away there for the next sixteen years.

The once vivacious, outgoing young girl became shy and withdrawn. And much less involved in the world around her.

Until one day she realized that a cupboard or a closet is no place for a person to live.

So, more than a decade and a half after she went into that closet, she resolved to come out of it publicly for the very first time. She was a featured speaker at a TED Conference in London, and on that very public stage she came out to the world, and maybe partly to herself, as a lesbian.<sup>1</sup>

And you think, we'll that's no big deal. And maybe you're right. For one thing it's perfectly safe nowadays to come out as a lesbian, and for another coming out as gay is probably not your thing anyway—though it might be.

In any case, it wasn't safe for Morgana, not in the 1990s, not in Kansas. And it only became safe because many other courageous LGBT people went before her and started telling their stories, which finally made it possible for her to follow their lead and tell hers.

And it's still not entirely safe for trans people to come out and claim their true identities. So there's still more work to be done, more stories to be told.

But the larger point here is that there are all sort of thresholds in life. For Joshua and the Hebrew people it was the Jordan River, that flowing line that marked the divide between who and where they had been and who and where God was calling them to be now.

I don't know what your threshold will like like. The only thing I know for certain is that if you are not there yet, you will be someday. And your threshold will be different from mine.

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<sup>1</sup> Morgana's full TED Talk, *The Danger of Hiding Who You Are*, can be found here: [http://www.ted.com/talks/morgana\\_bailey\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_hiding\\_who\\_you\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/morgana_bailey_the_danger_of_hiding_who_you_are)

I also know what the text knows: that it takes courage to step across that threshold, and that this is true at whatever stage of life you find yourself. Because the moment you take that step, life will immediately start to change.

It certainly did for the Hebrews. Yes, they had been in the wilderness for long long time, but for that whole time they simply had to trust Moses to provide for their needs. They're out of water, whap, Moses strikes the rock with his staff and they have fresh, clean water.

They're out of food, Moses beseeches God and, presto, manna and quail begin to arrive, morning and evening, and they continue to arrive for as long as they're out there.

They don't know where they are, but it doesn't really matter because they have a pillar of cloud to guide them by day and a cloud of fire to guide them by night.

But now there is no Moses, and the instant they cross that river there will be no more manna and no more cloud by day or fire by night. And the land they are about to enter is not what they were expecting.

It's not a land flowing with milk and honey that they will have all to themselves. It's a land already populated by other people. There will be conflict ahead of them, and of necessity they will soon discover the hard work of having to provide for themselves.

Life is about to get much more challenging for them, but also much richer, too, because it will be fully their life. They will be living where they're supposed to be living, doing what they're meant to be doing, living into their calling to be God's people in that part of the world.

And they will, finally, be home because they will have earned the right to call it that.

What might this process, this experience, look like for you? Where will this journey take you? Again, I don't know. I only know that living our own life, finding our place in the world and doing what we are meant to do, often starts with an honest assessment of our situation, and an honest conversation with ourselves, and perhaps also with the people around us, about it—the people who know us the best and love us the most. One that often begins with affirmations that are hard to say out loud.

I love you.

I don't want to be a veterinarian.

I want to play the cello.

I have cancer.

I love social work more than English lit.

You frighten me.

I want to have a baby. I don't want to have a baby.

I can't live independently any more.

I'm a really a girl inside.

I have a learning disorder.

I want to be a chef.

I feel called to ministry.

I want to live in France.

I'm a Republican.

How hard would it be to give voice to that latter truth at Warren Wilson? But that illustrates my point. Why does it take courage to come out to yourself and to cross these thresholds? Because the moment you do, things may change. Things will change.

You may have to get chemo, or counseling, or change your major. You may lose some friends or disappoint your parents. But a closet is no place for a person to live. And the good news is that while we will all eventually face our own thresholds and decision points, moments when we have to emerge from our own cupboard under the stairs, none of us has to cross them or come out of them alone.

For the Hebrews, once they crossed the Jordan there was no more manna, but God was still with them and for them.

Whether you are an incoming first year student, anxious about finding your place here, or in search of yourself and unsure about what that means. Or whether you're already 40 or 60 or 80 years into your life's journey,

We are all in this journey of life together and we will gather here every Sunday, to be with and for each other, and we can be strong and take courage because God will be with us and for us, too.