

“This Day – I Will Be With You”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
October 30, 2011

**Joshua 3: 7-17**

Last weekend, Debbie, the girls, and I went to Kenosha, Wisconsin. We had a great visit with our friends, Lance and Paige Loveall, and their children, Jacob and Emily. The four of us were classmates at Princeton Seminary, and Lance is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Kenosha.

One of the things which I appreciate about getting away and going to worship at other churches is that I get to be a true participant. It was nice to be able to walk in to the sanctuary and not have to worry about who needed to make a last-minute announcement, or if the temperature would be comfortable, or if I had all my materials ready. The reality of being a worship leader is that you must focus on many details, which often do not allow you to “relax” and fully be able to worship. That’s why I enjoyed very much spending an hour without having to center on those details, and being able to spiritually center on God.

It’s also a chance for me to observe how another congregation does things, and what I might learn from them. I shared some of those reflections with the Session at our meeting Monday night. It helped me to be “an outsider” for a week, and to look at things from that perspective. It made me wonder what it is like to walk into John Knox as “an outsider”: what do I see, feel, experience – for good or for bad? Do we have the ears to hear those perspectives, so that we might grow in health and purpose, and not remain stuck and comfortable?

Lance kept joking with me in the days leading up to last Sunday that he was looking forward to hearing me preach on Sunday. He even joked that he thought about downloading one of my sermons off the John Knox website and would start preaching it that Sunday, just to see how I would react. But alas, I shall have the last laugh, as I share something he preached last Sunday!

Last Sunday, Lance preached from the end of the book of Joshua, when the great leader of the Israelites was at the end of his earthly life. In chapter 24, Joshua implores the people: “Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve” (24:14-15).

That, in essence, is the end of the story we have read this morning. The gods which the Israelites’ ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt refers to the moment in time we have read today. The people of Israel stand on the precipice of something they had been promised throughout their years of slavery in Egypt, and then throughout 40 years of exile in the wilderness.

Their leader, Joshua, also is standing on the precipice of something new. Up until now, Moses had been the one called to lead God's people. However, it was not Moses' calling to lead them into Canaan; that was left to Joshua. Even though he had been by Moses' side throughout, Joshua's mentor was now gone. How would Joshua respond to this significant moment?

One commentator writes: *Our passage opens with God's reassurance that the divine presence will be with Joshua just as it had been with Moses. This is not simply God ratifying Joshua's promotion. God's presence has been crucial for the survival of the people from the beginning of their wilderness journeying. Our passage is not so much about Joshua's stature as about God's continuing provision for God's people through the Law, through Moses and Joshua, through the prophets, and through new leaders and new means of grace in subsequent generations* ([www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=10/30/2011&tab=2](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=10/30/2011&tab=2)).

But as Rick Morley writes, this moment speaks both to the Israelites' past and to their future. *In one sense, it's a bookend. As the Exodus began with the crossing of the Red Sea, the Exodus ends with the crossing of the River Jordan.*

*And, in this sense, it's a critical part of the story of the Exodus, because, it's the end of the story. The chapter of Israel's history that began with Moses, and the plagues, and Pharaoh's army drowning in the Sea . . . comes to a close.*

*The crossing of Jordan puts some level of closure on a forty year, nation-altering, and nation-forming event.*

*But, it can also be looked at in a different way. It's not just an ending. It's also a new beginning.*

*As the crossing of the Red Sea was a new beginning for the children of Israel, the crossing of Jordan is the prelude to a totally new chapter in the history of God's People.*

*As the Red Sea washed away the identity of Israel as a nation of slaves, Jordan's waters washes away their identity as homeless wanderers.*

*Crossing the Red Sea, God was shown as a God who liberates. Crossing Jordan, God is shown as a God who provides – and provides richly. Both of those aspects are so important to the character of God.*

*Forged out of their experience in the wilderness, the Israelites receive a new beginning. A new crossing. A new mighty act of God where the chaos of the waters are harnessed* ([www.rickmorley.com/archives/1081?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=crossing-again-yet-crossing-anew-a-reflection-on-joshua-37-17](http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1081?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=crossing-again-yet-crossing-anew-a-reflection-on-joshua-37-17)).

That's the end of the Exodus and the beginning of the Israelites' life in the promised land. Now, let's go to the end of that story, the chapter of that story which Lance preached on last week. Even though God had fulfilled his promise to provide the people their promised land, Joshua knew the people's natural tendency. As time wore on, they would forget what God had done for them, and they would be tempted to make choices which would steer them

further and further away from the Lord their God. That is why Joshua implores his people before he dies: “Choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (24:15).

As Lance shared with his congregation last week, what matters most is not a final, big decision, but the series of little choices we make which get us to that final result. We may be shocked one day that we can’t fit into a pair of pants like we could six months ago. But that unpleasant experience did not happen overnight; it was the result of a series of choices to not exercise, not eat healthily, and allow other things to take priority over our overall health. The specific, small, seemingly-insignificant choices can actually speak the loudest of any, for they reflect where we place our faith and priorities in our lives.

On a day when we reflect on the spiritual discipline of stewardship, I believe we have much to hear from Joshua’s call. As a church, it is not uncommon that as we make plans for the next year, we are left with many questions. I’ve lost count of how many times over the years I have heard: “Why can’t we give more to mission? Why are we cutting programming or staff budgets? How did we get to this point?”

How we get to this point is simple: it is the result of the collection of several smaller choices which we have made. When the majority of households keep their giving to the church the same year after year after year, the end result should not be a surprise. When we assume that the next person or family can make that extra commitment this year, the end result should not come as a surprise. When we believe that what we have is ours alone, and are not blessings from a gracious God, the end result should not come as a surprise. “How did we get to this point?” By making a series of small yet significant choices, which ultimately reflect our underlying priorities and faith.

“This day – I will be with you.” The small choices we make each day reflect our faith in that statement from God. If we truly believe that God will be with us this day, then we will return our thanks to God with how we choose to give of our time, our talent, and our treasure.

My grandmother, Ruth Mansell, turned 101 years old on Friday. She was the second of eight children, and her father, my great-grandfather, was a Presbyterian minister, while her mother was a homemaker. My grandmother’s sister, Adeline Ostwalt, died in September. When we gathered to celebrate Adeline’s life, her pastor shared in her homily a portion of a stewardship letter Adeline had written to that congregation a few years ago. I believe it reflects how we are called to make faithful, specific choices in our lives as disciples. Adeline wrote:

“The depression years were very challenging to our family. My parents had saved enough money to send my two oldest sisters off to college. Through the generosity of one of the presidents of our church’s colleges, the other five sisters received work scholarships, and were able to borrow money to complete our college education. My brother completed his college and

master's degree through the GI Bill. We all became teachers and directors of Christian education.

"The advice our father gave us whenever we went to a new job was this: 1) become a member of a church; 2) establish your credit; 3) register to vote. That advice has worked for me.

"I joined the church at the age of seven years. I was so excited to get my own envelopes for my offering. One side was for benevolences, the other side was for current expenses. I tried to always give the same amount to each. I approve of churches which have the policy of giving away as much as they spend on their expenses. It is with gratitude to God that I have been able to give and will continue to give" (Adeline Ostwalt, shared by Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, September 7, 2011).

Even in death, my aunt continued to give, for she designated a tithe – 10% of her estate – to be given with no restrictions to her congregation, Davidson College Presbyterian Church.

How will the choices we make reflect the faith we profess? What new thing is John Knox Presbyterian Church preparing to cross into through God's providence and care? How will our choices of stewardship – how we choose to spend our time, our talent, and our money – support God's leading of our congregation? How will we affirm our faith that this day, God will be with us?

"Choose this day whom you will serve – as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Thanks be to God. Amen.