

A VISION OF THRIVING

Where Do We Go From Here? (Part 1) | Joshua 1

I want to begin today a four-week series, based in the Old Testament book of Joshua, that can help you and me make the very most of this New Year. Chances are we need some help – because this past year (including last week) was a doozy! It was a year that many of us would probably prefer to forget and leave behind – which is why the story of Joshua is so perfect for this moment. Let me tell you why.

If you could binge-watch the Book of Deuteronomy – which is the program that comes right before the Book of Joshua... Even better, if you could watch its prequels --Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers... then you might be amazed at how relevant this part of the Bible is to us today. The story is like one of those programs where people are Breaking Bad and everyone's just trying to be a Survivor and you meet the Sons of Anarchy and the Real Housewives of Israel turn out to be a pretty desperate lot. I'm not kidding.

The storylines leading up to the tale we'll examine this month are about a nation in crisis. It's about people journeying through an unexpected wilderness. The pattern of life as they knew it before has fallen apart. The nation of Israel is having fights within itself and wars with other tribes. There's one disaster and disappointment after another. People have gotten SO tired of all this. Everyone wishes they could go back to the predictability of life as it was back in Egypt, though their memory of what life was like before has gotten kind of fuzzy. They've been in the wilderness so long. Most people are just hanging on. They've been told that there's a better day coming – a promised land out there – but they're not there yet and not sure when they'll get there.

Does this sound familiar? We've lived this show. And then there's a turning point. Moses, the charismatic and controversial leader of the nation, is suddenly gone. The last page of Deuteronomy turns over like an old year turns over to a New Year and the Book of Joshua begins and verse 1 reads as follows: **After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead." (Josh 1:1-2) "Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites." (Josh 1:2)**

Now, I don't have to use much imagination to figure out what the people of Israel were feeling at that moment. Some people were probably fixated on the passing of Moses. What are we going to talk about if we can't believe in or beat up on him? How bad or good is the next administration going to be? But I suspect that as the word went out that they'd come to the Jordan River, the majority of people weren't only thinking about their human leaders. They were about to cross over into a land they'd never been to before. The question that had to rise for a lot of them was: *WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? Will this next season be like the last or something different? In the days ahead,*

will I have to keep working to just SURVIVE or is there a future in which I can truly THRIVE?

As you and I emerge dripping wet from the river between 2020 and 2021, chances are we are asking similar questions. *How do I make 2021 a year in which I don't merely survive but truly thrive? Is that possible? Is there anything I can do or pursue that will increase the probability that this will be a year of thriving?* God was basically saying to Joshua and his people, I want you to have something better in this era ahead than you've had in that wilderness behind you. And I believe He says that same to us.

Now, it's NOT like there was nothing of value in the wilderness the people of Israel had been walking through. On the contrary – much as some of us discovered over this past year – there is a lot of beauty and blessing to be found in the desert. You start really paying attention to the subtle details of life when you're in the wilderness. You start being more grateful for simple daily bread. You learn the value of slowing and silence and rest. When you are decoupled from the usual routines, you may learn to play more. Many who walk through the wilderness learn to pray more – especially for patience and perseverance and for all the fruit of the Spirit.

If you read the Bible stories that come before the Book of Joshua, then you'll find that all of these were among the blessings the Israelites found during their wandering in the desert. Those forty years in the wilderness were not a waste of time; they were a time of refining and preparation for seizing the opportunities of the new season ahead. So... *What are the lessons God taught you – the good changes God brought about in you – during this past year?* Hold onto those treasures from the desert. Keep them in your backpack as you cross over the river into this New Year.

But, for God's sake, cross over. Let God lead you now into a new land. If you study the biblical text carefully, you see that God is actually pointing to a definitive line and saying to Joshua and his people, "*Cross over into the new.*" **Moses my servant is dead. (Josh 1:1-2).** That was the Old Life. **Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them. (Josh 1:2).** This is the New Life.

And then God goes on to paint for Joshua a vision of the sort of LIFE he wants for his people on the journey ahead. **I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. (Josh 1:3)** In other words, you will no longer be an anxious wanderer in this world, but a confident traveler. Every place you go will be your place. A place of discovery, of opportunity, of belonging. **Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. (Josh 1:4)** In other words, your influence is going to stretch farther south and north and east and west than it ever has before. I want to use you for good in bigger and better ways than you've dared to imagine. And God says, **No one will be able to stand against you**

all the days of your life. (Josh 1:5) In other words, you will be a conqueror in this life. You will be one of those stunningly resilient people who no enemy or emergency can finally overcome. In short, the life behind you may have been about just SURVIVING; but the life into which I am leading you is all about THRIVING.

What if this wasn't just a conversation God had with one man long ago in a very different time? What if God said this to Joshua knowing that someday it would become his Word to YOU? You see, this whole vision of being a confident presence wherever we go, of having an expanding influence for good, of being someone who no one and no thing can topple, isn't just what it means to be an ancient Israelite; it's what it means to be a Christ-follower today. We are to be confident, compassionate, creative, courageous people – the kind of people our country needs right now in every sphere and setting. So, let's take the good stuff from last year with us. Let's leave what's dead behind us. And let's cross over into the vision of thriving God wants for his people.

But let me underline an important qualification. Moving from mere surviving to thriving doesn't just happen by simply putting one foot in front of the other and wandering forward. As we are going to see in much greater depth in the next few weeks, thriving comes from having a mindset of obedience to God's leading... from cultivating certain kinds of relationships... from tapping into a strength that is rooted in the knowledge of your own weakness. These are phenomenally important truths we're going to see played out in the life of Joshua and so desperately need to get played out more in American life today and our life in this year ahead, if we want to THRIVE!

When I think of someone who has God's heart to see you and me and our country thrive, I think of Jean-Baptiste Mugarura. Jean-Baptiste is one of Christ Church's long-term mission partners in Africa. If ever there was someone who understands what it is to walk through a wilderness, to see his country in turmoil and conflict, and to both suffer and serve his way through it, it is Jean-Baptiste. This man lived in Uganda amidst the extreme political instability during and after the fall of Idi Amin, one of the most controversial and frankly bloody leaders of modern time. Jean-Baptiste also spent time in Burundi during their terrible political crisis. But, most significantly, Jean-Baptiste lived in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide when, in the space of three months, more than a million people lost their lives when neighbor turned against neighbor. Jean-Baptiste lost his family.

Somehow, he survived. Step-by-step, Jean-Baptiste he clambered his way out of the red river of that time and moved forward. He moved through a period of barely surviving to truly thriving again. He didn't just do that personally. He formed a team of Christian youthworkers who sowed Christian vision and character into half a million young people across his land to help ensure that such division and destruction would never happen again. Through the efforts of Jean-Baptiste and people like him, Rwanda is a peaceful ,thriving country again.

So, when a letter arrived in my email box on Friday from Jean-Baptiste – as I was watching video of violent acts and terrible division in my own country – do you think I deleted it? No, I thought maybe I should read his letter. And, after reading it, I got his permission to share it with you...

I am watching with great sadness what is going on at the capitol building in Washington DC. I am only a foreigner who cannot claim to know or to love your country more than Americans know and love their country. But if there is one foreigner who loves your country a lot, then it must be me. I love your country... I have been to big cities, to small cities and to the rural America... I have visited schools and churches... I have been in numerous homes... I can claim to know how decent your country is. I do not want to believe that what has been happening in your country represents decent people like you my friends. I know you are hurt by the politics of the last few years. I love you and I pray with you.

The events of 2020 were disheartening. But what I am watching right now makes me wonder about the future of the USA. Your freedom and democracy, your political stability and maturity, gave hope to many people from countries that are not yet democratic. Unfortunately, what I am watching is a cause for concern for all of us, whether Americans or non-Americans.

I remember a story in the Bible where two women were fighting over one child. King Solomon in his wisdom wanted to test truly who is the mother of the child and he suggested cutting the child into two so that each woman can take one half. The lady who was not the real mother saw it as a brilliant idea, because for her, if she could not have the boy, then no one should have the boy. She would rather see him dead than to lose him for someone else. On the other hand, the real mother would rather see the boy alive whether she keeps him with her or not (1 Kings 3:16-28).

I pray that the country that I love USA should not have leaders who think like this woman who was not the real mother. I know you would rather see your country alive than destroyed. May you spread the same message to your beloved ones. May the country I love, USA never try to go that route for partisan political gains that tear the country into two or different factions... I am praying for you. I am hurting, and I know you are hurting even more. [But] take heart... I am sharing my heart with you.

One might even say, as God says to Joshua: **Be strong and very courageous! (Joshua 1:7).**

Please pray with me...

God, we dare to believe there is a new life beyond the wilderness, beyond this turbulent river we are wading through right now. As we come to your table today, that table around which sits Jean-Baptiste and more good-hearted people than we may have yet realized, renew our faith, our hope, our love. Make us more obedient to you, committed to a real relationship with you, and ready to be channels of your strength made perfect in our weakness. Lead us from mere surviving to thriving, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.