

INTRO

It was just over a year ago, that Pastor Rob send out a message to several key staff, asking us to cancel whatever our plans were so that we could assemble for an important meeting in his office the next morning. You could hear the urgency in his tone. We arrived unsure but with expectation that something important was about to happen. And as we sat around the table Rob informed us that we'd be canceling services for the next few weeks and that we needed to prepare to move everything online.

But here's what happened. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. And months turned into an entire year. As time passed business closed. People lost jobs. Lives were lost. There wasn't a place you could go and not feel the effects of this wilderness. It's been a strange and disorienting place.

And yet, slowly but surely, we could see some signs of hope. Vaccines were developed and people started receiving them. [Slide: Picture of people getting a vaccine] Schools started to reopen. We can now see loved ones posting pictures of hugging and visiting family members for the first time in months. [Slide: Picture of grandparents & grandkids] More churches are opening their doors again. And slowly but surely, hope was no longer this distant memory, but the end finally feels in sight. Which does not mean that we still don't need to be vigilant, but we're hopeful in a new kind of way.

Our own situation gives us a glimpse into what the Israelites may have been thinking as they finally approached their promised land. They can see it just across the Jordan River. They have been wandering in the desert for 40 years, Moses has just died, and a new leader named Joshua has emerged. And as we turn the page to our Scripture text for today, God doesn't allow them to sulk but instead says, "get going." They've waited 4 decades and now they too can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The promised land is no longer a figment of their imagination.

They can see it. It's real. It exists. In many ways their story is just a constant reminder that whatever you might be today, it won't always be like this. Even when the days, weeks, and months go by in the wilderness, it's possible to come out of this. At times we don't always believe it. It doesn't always feel like it. **But the wilderness is meant to be a season and not a sentence.** You can come out of this...we can come out of this...

And as they make preparations to go, God calls them into the locker room to give them a divine pep talk. Three times in this first chapter God tells Joshua, "Be strong and be courageous." As the Message paraphrases it, "Strength! Courage!" Three different times we hear these words.

The people are coming out of the wilderness and God gives them a message that they will need in order to receive their promised land. Now God could have said, look, you have been strong and courageous. You've been wandering for 40 years. But that would suggest that the need for courage and strength was over now that the end was in site. But quite the opposite is now true. *(hand gesture to illustrate)* **This is not a Word for the wilderness but it's what they need as they are coming out of the wilderness and into their promised land.**

POINT 1 [Slide: Whatever God is calling us to won't be easy!]

Coming out of the wilderness is not going to be a cake walk. One would think that after 40 years of wandering things would get a little easier for them. But that's certainly not the message that God gives to Joshua and it's not message that's God is giving to us. When they were in the wilderness, water came from the rocks. Manna came from heaven. But coming out things will be different. They will now have to work for whatever they wanted.

My story: I can remember a season like this in our lives. It was 2009, at the height of the last recession. Meagan, my spouse, had just graduated, and we were moving back to Nashville, TN so I could finish seminary. While in school, it felt like so much had been provided for and now we were entering uncharted territory.

I was working as an intern at a church, but in truth, I wasn't making much money, and Meagan needed a job. Hoped for something in her field. That summer and fall we applied for over 80 positions, wrote so many cover letters. Applied for things that as I look back, Meagan was in no way qualified for. But we were trying

anything we could. Gratefully, family and friends helped us out for a couple of months to pay rent. This sure didn't feel like the promised land. (pause)

And it took until December, but that job finally came. That job we worked so hard for, set up a career that Meagan still enjoys and feels called to.

Looking back, I've come to appreciate that some of the most rewarding and stretching experiences in life can be the hardest journeys we take. Think of all the journeys that God has called people to do in the Bible. God called people to leave their homes and travel to a place that they have never been or seen. God called people to build arks when there was no sign of rain. God called people to walk through the Red Sea. To leave their boats and nets. Just because it hard. Just because it takes work. Just because it's the hardest thing you might ever do doesn't mean it's not from God. If it's worth having it won't come easy.

Strength! Courage! God says.

POINT 2 [Slide: Every season comes with own unique challenges]

This is no small detail. Don't make light of the fact that this will be first time that this generation of people get to own their own land. They spent over 400 years working Egyptian lands – building somebody else's' houses and tombs. They spent 40 years in the desert and now they finally get a place to call home. The deed gets to be in their name. They have to grow their own crops. Take care of their own fields. When something gets broken, they can't call the landlord. The bill is in their name. It theirs. They own it. This is significant, because for the last 400+ years they've just been trying to survive.

Even in the wilderness, they were essentially nomads. They had to pitch tents and set up camp whenever they traveled. They pretty much had the same diet for 40 years. They had problems trusting God when they couldn't see any signs or whenever they had a need. The wilderness came with its own issues.

But watch how God describes what coming out means, "every square inch of the land you set your foot on – it's yours!" Wow. That's something worth celebrating. There just one problem. The land is occupied. There were kings and tribes living there with their own tribal armies. There were 7 cities to conquer. There were so

called giants living in the land. Fortified Walls. Fortified cities. Even promised lands come with their own problems. And that's a problem! The same land that's promised comes with a lot of new problems.

Here's where I think we go wrong. We don't accurately take into account the new challenges that arise in the different seasons of our lives. Coming out of the wilderness does not mean that all of the problems will just magically go away. It just means that the problems change. We mistakenly assume that because this is a blessing to us that the problems will somehow decrease. Just because something has been promised doesn't mean it won't come with problems and it's own unique challenges.

Your dream job will come with challenges. The calling that God has for our lives will come with its own challenges. **Every season comes with its own challenges.**

Being single comes with challenges. Being married comes with challenges. Being a person of faith comes with challenges. Unemployment comes with challenges. Working comes with its own set of challenges. Being in the wilderness comes with a set of challenges and even coming out has its own challenges as well. Employee or supervisor, challenges.

So, let's do each other a favor and stop pretending as though one season is better and easier than the other. Can we commit to that? (If you're in the room right now, can you say, "yes!" And if you're in the chat right now, can you type, "yes!" Because we have not been honest about our own challenges we give people the wrong perception about what being blessed looks and feels like. Imagine if we said, being a follower of Jesus Christ is actually really hard and really confusing at times. Imagine if we said that loving other people is just really challenging. But because we are not honest with others or ourselves, people walk into their promised lands and are ambushed by the challenges they face because of a misguided perception. So many people have given up on God, given up on the church, and even given up on themselves because they assumed that promises and problems could not exist in the same place.

No wonder we might need Strength and Courage.

POINT 3 [Slide: What got them here won't get them there]

Their old ways of thinking won't work. Coming out of the wilderness would

require a different mentality. In order for this whole thing work, in order them to truly live into this promise they would essentially have to forget much of what they've learned and be open to learning a completely different way of living.

One of my favorites movies of all time is Shawshank redemption. Andy, played by Tim Robbins is sentenced to two consecutive life sentences for a crime that he didn't commit. And while in prison, he meets a guy named Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Red is the guy in the prison that knows everybody, knows how to get things done, knows who to talk to, how to get cigarettes...he's that guy. Most of the men in this prison have been there for a long before they ever get out. Red has been in prison for 40 years and then something frightening happens. Something that many were not able to handle. Something that many could not live through. After 40 years he's paroled. He gets out. Is set free. Now for the inmate that has been in prison for that long the scariest part is not staying, it's actually coming out. Take a look at this clip and see if it might resonate. [Movie Clip (2:34)]

"Where I won't have to be afraid all of the time."

Don't be too quick, before you say, that's not my story - let's look at this again. For so many of us, we know what it's like to survive in even the most difficult situations (even prison) because it's the one that we've mastered. But what happens when we are called out of the life we know, the job we know, the lifestyle we know, the status we know, the dysfunction we know and are called into places that require us to become something different. Because what used to work in one season doesn't work in another. The skills don't all transfer. The knowledge doesn't work. Maybe we are not trying to go back into prison, but we certainly aren't excited to rush into new places and try new things because the wilderness, the wilderness is what we know.

The Israelites had mastered being in the wilderness. After 40 years, they got into a rhythm. They know when to expect the rain. They knew how to get the manna. They knew how to set up tents. They knew how to be slaves to the Egyptians. They knew how to make it as wandering nomads, but coming out of the wilderness would demand that they learn skills, new talents. It required them to become what they had not been before. And that scares some of us more than being in the wilderness. For some people being sober, being healed, being called, being different, is the journey that really frightens us. Now we have to find new ways of coping. New ways of living. New ways operate. New skills. New friends.

And so here it is a third time, “Strength! Courage! Be strong and courageous.

CONCLUSION

When Joshua and the people hear these words they’re still in the wilderness. They carry no weapons. They are not soldiers. And they know from the spies who’ve been across the Jordan that in the territory they are going into they are outmanned and outnumbered. But God says, “be strong and courageous,” because I am with you.

But here’s what’s different. In the wilderness God led them by cloud by day and fire by night. But that’s all gone now. Now Joshua is given only God’s word and instructed to study the law day and night. All he has are words.

I can image when he comes out of the wilderness, he going to hear so many other voices. He’ll hear that he’s nothing like Moses. Someone will complain about going up against these other nations. And he can’t point to the cloud or the fire anymore. He can only repeat God’s words. They are what he has.

Did you know that Martin Luther King Jr. never met Gandhi but was so inspired by his words that it impacted how he approached the entire movement? Just words.

In a similar way, Paul never met Jesus in the flesh but was so inspired by his encounter and teachings that he traveled extensively to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ based just off of words.

Every day in my house I have an example of the power of words. With a daughter under 16 months she is constantly learning words. The other day, I heard her say, “ut-oh” when she dropped something. Where, I wonder, did she learn a phrase like that? Or a phrase like, “I love you.”

The words we carry with us shape us. But as we enter a new season, answer God’s calling perhaps it is God’s words to the people that we need to hear most. Strength! Courage! Because God is with us. Won’t give up on us. Won’t leave us.

And that truth overrules whatever we might have picked up in the past. Whatever we've been saying about ourselves as we wander, whatever we think others are saying about us. Whatever excuses for not going we've been making.

We aren't strong told to be strong and courageous because it will be easy. Or because it's gotten us this far. We're told to be strong and courageous because, "God, our God, is with us every step forward we take."

All we have is God's word is one of hope. Strength! Courage! For I am with you!