

January 1, 2012  
The National Presbyterian Church

## The Best is Yet to Come

Joshua 1:1-9

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Listen to these words. They're attributed to the Greek poet, Hesiod, from the eighth century before Christ.

*"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous use of today. For certainly, all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise in their own eyes and impatient of restraint."*

Or what about these words attributed to Socrates in the fifth century before Christ.

*"The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders, and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their household. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, and tyrannize their teachers."*

And what about these words, in our own era but still a long time ago - Peter the Hermit, A.D. 1274.

*"The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they knew everything. And what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them. As for the girls, they are forward, immodest, unladylike in speech, behavior and dress."*

Interesting comments. You may have heard them before in many a speech. You can find these words scattered throughout the internet, ostensibly coming from 700 to 2,500 or 2900 years ago.

Well, maybe. Or, actually ... maybe not. When you check into these statements that were made seemingly a long time ago, there actually is very little evidence, in fact none, that these folks actually spoke these words. So we always need to check what's on the internet! But even if Peter the Hermit (about whom we know virtually nothing) never said these words, or Plato, Socrates, or Hesiod (folks we know something about), never said these words - in all likelihood, somebody in their generation actually did, or said or thought or wrote something similar to these words - because, as we all know, in *every* day and generation there are always those who have spread this kind of general message of gloom and doom, far and wide: "***The best is over. The present is, well, just really bad. And the worst is yet to come.***" And to make their case, of course, there is no shortage of evidence, whether from the past or from the present.

The Present: Our personal Lives. If we think about the present and draw close to home, thinking about our own lives, I know that there are some of us here today who are facing some really, really hard circumstances. We have decisions to make that I would not wish on anyone. And we have limitations and debilitating issues to deal with, which are truly hard and truly difficult.

- And if we, ourselves, don't have them, then perhaps our children have them.
- And if our children don't have them, then perhaps the parents we care for have them.
- And if they don't have them, then perhaps our friends or our colleagues have them.

We know of people for whom the present is really, really hard, and for whom the future doesn't seem to be that exciting as we stand here at the beginning of a new year.

The Present: Our Lives Together. And if it's hard enough in the present in our personal lives, it's just as hard, if not harder, in our life together as a nation. It's very hard to miss the constant barrage of bleak news about our economy or about unemployment. Unemployment, actually, is apparently just a little bit less serious than a month ago, and it's a whole lot less serious, by the way, than it was in the days of the Great Depression. But it's still twice what it was just five years ago. And it leads to all kinds of other problems that are part and parcel of our society.

- I don't know if you know how many people are homeless in our metro area. The statistics that I was able to find, and I tried to double check these, indicate that there are about 12,000 homeless people in the D.C. metro area. Four thousands of them are children. And have you any idea what that does to a child to be homeless, both in terms of their family and in terms of their education - moving from one school, one place to another? And we know that some of the problems of homelessness, while they're caused by the economy; others related to homelessness are caused by health, physical health, and mental health.
- . . . which then raises that other issue that we seem unable to deal with in our nation, and that is the resolution of the health care crisis. How in the world do we (publicly or privately) provide the best health care possible to those who really need it, at a price that our nation can afford? And we go round and round in circles. There seems to be no resolution there.

Just as in our personal lives in the present there may be problems; in our national life in the present; there are certainly problems.

The Present: Beyond our shores. And if these are not enough to justify the naysayers and those who think that things are going from bad to worse, all we need to do is expand our horizons beyond our shores to the world around about us, and we discover that there are drug wars in Mexico, and famine and civil war in the Sudan, and deadlock remains in the Middle East, and atomic weapons may be found in Iran, and soldiers and civilians are still dying in Afghanistan.

So the present and the immediate future don't look particularly happy. And there's a lot of evidence for those who would say that the best is, in fact, over, and the present is really bad, and the worst is yet to come.

The Past: The Bible. And if the present doesn't provide enough ammunition for that point of view, locally, nationally, internationally - then we can add to the scenario by looking back to the past. And indeed, no further than the pages of the Bible, which provide for us one bad news story after another.

In fact, if we were to turn the Bible stories into headlines from two to three thousand years ago, some of the headlines would read just like this:

- “This just in from the Book of Genesis. Seven year famine in North Africa continues.”
- Or, “This just in from the Book of Exodus. Forced labor builds monument for proposed tourist trade in Egypt.” Well, I’m thinking about the Pyramids there.
- Or, “New superpowers rise in the East.” That would be Second Kings. And in this case, the superpowers would be Assyria, and Babylon.
- Or, “Security issues plague construction project in our major city.” That would be the Book of Nehemiah and Jerusalem
- Or, “Rebuilding national confidence hampered by special interests, loss of national unity, corruption in leadership in the political and the religious realms.” Just go to the prophets, like Malachi or Jeremiah.

Or if you want to turn over the leaf in the newspaper or to the second half of the news report, and move on to the gossip column, we might find this . . .

- Back to our report from Genesis, “Sibling rivalry leads to murder of brother.”
- Or in the Book of Kings, “Leading family found to be in sexual chaos.”
- Or here’s my favorite one from the Book of First Kings, “Palace announces one hundred more royal weddings this year in the Temple in Jerusalem for King Solomon.”

Well, they’re bad news stories. Some of them are deadly; some of them are merely salacious. But they’re all over the place, and you can find them in the present; you can find them in the past. And you can find them all over the Bible if you really want to look for them. There is no dearth of bad news stories out there.

*But what I find to be interesting about the pages of the Bible and the stories that are told there is this - that despite the amazing number of those bad news stories, the Bible as a whole, is not a bad news book.*

It does not carry a message of doom and gloom, and has no intention of echoing those falsely attributed quotes by inferring that “*the best is over, and that the present is bad, and the worst is yet to come.*”

Instead, the story of the Bible as a whole, while it never shuns away from the bad news, is precisely a story which wants to let us know that behind the headlines there runs another story, a deeper story, a more profound story. Behind the bad news, there stands good news that remains unshakable, despite all the bad news in the world. And that good news is this –

that God is still at work and will always be at work in this world,

and will work until the job is done and the battle is won.

And God is at work in this way, not only through the good but through the bad;

not only through the easy but through the hard;

not only when the path is clear but when it comes to a

dead end;

not only in the past, but yes, in the present. *And surely in the future, as well.*

On a secular level, this is actually the identical approach to stirring up our own nation from its lethargy, taken by Franklin Roosevelt in his first Inaugural Address on March the 4th, 1933. The Great Depression is lingering on. And what does he do? He openly - openly shares the bad news at some length. He says,

“This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly.

Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today.

Values have shrunk to fantastic levels. Taxes have risen. Our ability to pay has fallen. Government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income. The means of exchange are frozen in the currents of trade. The withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side. Farmers find no market for their produce. The savings of many years in thousands of families are gone. More important, a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return.”

He does not hide the grim, bad news. And he adds,

“Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.”

There is no denial here; no denial of the evidence at all. But yet this is not a message of doom and gloom. And what he is not saying is that the best is over and the present is bad, and the worst is yet to come. He goes on to say,

“We are stricken by no plague of locust. Compared with the perils our forefathers conquered because they believed, and we’re not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for. This great nation will endure, as it has endured; will revive, and will prosper.”

And then remember those famous words with which he began? He said,

“Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

This is precisely - *this is precisely* – the message and the challenge that fills the Bible, especially when it tells us those repeated dark tales. And it’s precisely the message that God shares so clearly with his servant, Joshua, in the Scripture reading that we read just a few moments ago. Let me take you back to that glorious passage of Scripture, the opening verse of Joshua Chapter 1, that I hope that you will re-read when you go home today.

Joshua is standing, our passage tells us, on the brink of the Promised Land. He is looking at it. He is looking into the future. From the outside, he is looking forward. And it is an amazing moment. It is a moment filled with potential; filled with amazing potential, this future that lies ahead - but also filled with the potential for fear and paralysis. Behind Joshua, in the past, the glorious past, stands Moses. To him: his leader, his mentor, his friend, like a father. To the people, like a God - leading God’s people out of slavery, (how amazing!), across the wilderness, keeping this rabble together - how incredible, to this very moment. What an amazing, glorious past, troubled as it was; amazing and glorious, filled with the power of God.

Yet as he stands here, Moses has just died and is no more, and is not with him. And he would surely want to linger in his grief – but he cannot, there’s no time to linger . . . because the vacuum of leadership must be filled and there is no one else to fill it. He is the only one who has been through everything with Moses and now stands as the *de facto* leader on whom the people must call. And the mantle of leadership falls to him. But who can ever fill the shoes of a saint like Moses?

So here is Joshua, *looking to the past and standing in the present, and looking ahead to the future*. And there ahead lies this land that has been promised, but it is filled with fortified cities and with armies of men who look like giants. And the temptation was surely great for Joshua to think the worst . . . here we go again: *‘The best is over, the present is really, really bad, and the worst - it’s yet to come.’*

And God knows that such thoughts as these might well fill his mind. He knows that Joshua is human. He knows his weaknesses. He knows the potential for fear, and for paralysis. And so God challenges Joshua and comforts him with what I think are some of the greatest words in all of Scripture, the greatest commands, and the greatest promises.

What is it that God says to Joshua in the first chapter? He says this, “Joshua, here’s the bad news. Let me remind you of it.” No denial of it. “My servant, Moses, is dead.” I’m not going to beat around the bush. “*My servant, Moses, is dead.* The future is tough. The enemy, the Hittites, they are in the land ahead of you. Here’s the challenge. You keep moving ahead, proceed to *cross the Jordan into the land* anyway. You move into the future. It will not be easy. You will need every ounce of strength and courage that you have. There will be plenty of things that will frighten you, and even some that will dismay you. *But be strong, I command you, and very courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed.* And *follow in the path that Moses taught you - the laws and the Commandments that I gave.* Read them, remember them, lay them in your heart and in your mind. And then remember my promises - my promises.

1. Number one - *no one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life.* No one, no matter how big they may seem.
2. Number two - *as I was with Moses, so I will be with you . . . with Moses! - as I was with Moses!! so I will be with you.”*  
Just the right word at the place of deepest fear that God would not be with him as with this glorious saint. “*I will not fail you or forsake you.*”
3. Number three. “*And I will be with you wherever you go.* No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I shall be with you. I will never fail you or forsake you. And I will be with you, wherever you go!

As if to say, “I know the bad news, and it is bad. But despite the bad news, the best is far from over. The present may be bad, and the future may be tough. But armed with my law and living within my purposes, and protected and comforted by my promises, what I want you, Joshua, to discover is this - that the best is yet to come.” And Joshua discovered it. He did. He discovered it in reality what he hoped for in his mind and heart.

And this, my friends, is surely what God wants us to know, as we stand at the brink of this new year, to know and experience as well. These words to Joshua were not written merely for him, but for you and me who stand in the light of the life of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. God wants us to know that in the new year that lies ahead and, indeed, in all the years that lie ahead, and more than that, stretching out to all eternity, despite the bad news and the toughness of the path (and for some of us, yes, that path is really tough) - the best is not behind us, but lies ahead.

This word to Joshua is God's word for us, as well!

Don't believe the phony words of Peter the Hermit, or of Socrates, or of Hesiod! Or, at least, the words falsely attributed to them, for one minute. Don't hold on to them. But hold firm to the word that God gives to us today.

Let's say these words together and claim them for ourselves:

*"Be thou strong and very courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed. For the Lord, your God is with you, wherever you go"*  
(Joshua 1:9). Thanks be to God.

Let us bow before God in prayer.

"Almighty God, we bow before you. You know our lives. You know that there are some dark valleys that we face, and are in. You know us well. But you knew your servant, Joshua, well, and so many others. Be to us our friend, our guide, our leader, and confirm in our lives the commands you gave to Joshua, and the promises, as well, this day, throughout this year, and in the days ahead. For the sake and glory of Your great name. Amen."

## **THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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