

Walking Off Our Map

Joshua 1: 5-9
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Triune Mercy Center

Well, by now, most of you have probably heard the big news around here: Deb Richardson-Moore has announced her retirement, effective August 1. It's hard to imagine Triune without Deb: when she arrived 15 years ago, there was a soup kitchen and that was about it. She held worship services in this big sanctuary, for 15-20 people. The building was in disrepair, there were empty beer cans and used needles scattered around the property, and she was fresh out of seminary, a rookie pastor who did not know what she was doing. Her previous career as a newspaper reporter at The Greenville News had not prepared her for this either. For her first 6 months here, she doubted she could make herself stay for a whole year.

But it didn't take long for God to give Deb a vision of addressing the root causes of poverty and homelessness, rather than simply giving people handouts, and look at what has grown over the years! We now have social workers and rehab counselors, Circles, Round Table, AA and NA meetings, the Art Room, a Bon Secours Nurse Practitioner on site, Legal Aid, Jasmine Road... my oh my! Deb is quick to say that she would never have thought of many of these things, that many times, people from the community just showed up and offered their services. But still, it all happened under her leadership; she had the wisdom and courage to say, "Let's try it!"

But now we face the challenge of being Triune Mercy Center without her. She will ride off into the sunset, to write more murder mysteries and travel with Vince, but we will have to figure out how to be Triune without her. One thing that is very reassuring is that much of what goes on around here on a daily basis is not directly dependent on Deb; our highly competent staff and volunteers will continue their ministry of Round Table and Circles, hot meals, addiction recovery, legal assistance and medical care, and so on.

As Deb said last week, the Board of Directors will form a Search Committee to be made up of Board members and people who worship here regularly; Elaine Nocks, who chairs the Personnel Committee of the Board, will serve as Chair of the Search Committee. The Search Committee will finalize a job description, publicize the job opening, review resumes, interview candidates, and present a recommendation to the Board. The Search Committee is open to input from the congregation; if you know of someone who might be interested in the position, please refer them to the Triune website, where a preliminary job description has already been posted. The Search Committee will also give periodic updates to the congregation, just to let us know where they are in the process. I can assure you of this: we are in good hands; the people who are leading this process know Triune inside and out, and they are going about this holy task with prayer, integrity, and the utmost commitment to the ministry in this place.

We are in good hands. But the fact remains that change is hard. Deb's retirement is a Big Deal to Triune. She has been here for 15 years, the entire life of Triune Mercy Center as we know it; as a Board, a staff, and a congregation, we haven't been through a transition like this before. We are "walking off our map", leaving behind the familiar and walking into an unknown future. Lots of questions are rolling around: what will this next chapter look like? Who will be the new pastor? Will he/she be a good fit? What changes will he/she bring? And lots of emotions are rolling around within us: some folks may feel a deep sense of loss, a grief that Deb won't be here every day any more. Some folks may feel uneasy with the uncertainty of what comes next, afraid of an unknown future. Some dread this in-between time, this time of transition, this disruption of the way things are. Still others may feel angry that she is leaving us. Others may feel happy for her, to be able to write and travel and have some free time. And of course, many of us feel several of these emotions, all at the same time.

Thousands of years ago, the Hebrew people faced an enormous change in leadership. The long-time leader of the Hebrew people, Moses, had been a powerful instrument of God's purposes. Through Moses, God delivered the Hebrew people out of bondage in Egypt, God led the people through the Red Sea, God gave the Law to the people and guided the people through 40 years in the wilderness. Moses would be the first to say that he didn't do all this by himself, but God certainly did amazing things through Moses. Moses was the only leader that a whole generation knew.

But when the Hebrew people arrive at the Jordan River, ready to cross over it into the Promised Land, Moses is told that he cannot go with them. He is not to be part of that next chapter of the people's lives. That is unsettling, to say the least; the Hebrew people can not imagine life without Moses. They cannot imagine walking off their map, into the unknown future without him.

But God is still watching over the people. And God takes the opportunity in this scary time of transition to say powerful, reassuring words to the next leader, Joshua. Please read along with me our text, Joshua 1: 5-9: This text is truly one of my favorites. God says to Joshua,

"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. 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.”

Three times in these 5 verses, God says “Be strong and of good courage”; and in this passage, not just once but twice, God promises to be with Joshua. God reassures Joshua not to be frightened or dismayed; God promises not to fail Joshua or forsake him. These words of God spoken to Joshua are words that God speaks to each one of us, and to us as a congregation.

I can just hear God now, speaking a revised version of those words to us, as we enter our time of transition: “As I was with the Hebrew people so long ago, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, being careful to act in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Deb has preached. I hereby command you: be strong and of good courage; do not be frightened, do not be dismayed, for the Lord you God is with you wherever you go.”

With God’s promises and reassurances ringing in our ears, we can move into the future knowing that God will not let go of us, that God will continue to guide us each step of the way as we walk off our map. And this time of transition may well be a time of richness for us, a time of spiritual growth, when we learn to trust God even more deeply than before, a time that we experience the steadfastness and the promises of God in new ways, a time that we learn to be open to the new things that God is doing in our midst.

There’s a poem entitled *God Knows*, by Minnie Louise Haskins. She wrote it for the beginning of a new year, but it has relevance for us at the beginning of this new chapter of our life together:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied: “Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light
and safer than a known way.”
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God,
trod gladly into the night.
And God led me toward the hills
and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Thanks be to God! Amen.