

## “A YEAR OF RE-WORDS”

Joshua 24:1-28

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After a long and life-threatening illness, there is an awakened sense of gratitude for each new day and its possibilities.



A couple who for years took each other for granted rediscover the joy of marriage as they recommit to their vows.



A neighborhood is revitalized when people work hard together to make community-oriented development a reality.



Farmers patiently work to restore the health of soil depleted by years of too-intensive farming.



Men and women whose lives were ruled by addiction tell stories about making a new beginning.



A church responds to a local need and finds that new ministries give it a restored sense of purpose.



Those are some images of what “renewal” can look like.

When the Worship Team began to talk about a theme to guide our planning in the coming year, we were thinking about the fact that we are beginning our 60<sup>th</sup> year as a congregation.



In October of 2018, we’ll celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the chartering of Westminster as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church. That’s a big deal, and of course there will be a lot of reminiscing! But an anniversary like this is also a time for looking forward, asking what’s next.

That’s important because we are also aware that, like all living things and human groups, churches have life cycles. They don’t just get established and then chug along doing the exact same things indefinitely. Things change, and so do we. We grow, we learn, we age, we have successes, we make mistakes, we go backwards, we move forward again. We welcome some of the changes that come along, and we are unhappy about others. C’est la vie. But any community thrives best when it embraces the truth that its life has to be renewed again and again and again.

It's kind of natural that changes or milestones provide a push toward that renewal. That's what's going on in the story we heard to day from Joshua.



Joshua's challenge to the people of Israel comes at one of those important junctures. They have been in the land God promised them for a while; they have survived a lot of struggle and hardship and enemies, and now it looks like perhaps they can live in peace. Joshua, who has led them since the death of Moses, is nearing the end of his life, and this means that a new era is about to begin. He takes the people through that long retelling of their journey to remind them of all that God has brought them through, and he urges them to renew their commitment to be God's faithful people.

Joshua's words have been turned into sentimental plaques and needlepoint and the like celebrating the modern Christian family (just google "choose this day who you will serve" and you will be amazed at how many cutesy versions of this you can find!). But the scene is far from sentimental: the history Joshua recites is meant to remind the people not just the God brought them through a lot of trouble, but that, along the way, they have encountered other gods of the cultures around them – gods of tribes, of places, gods that promise rain or fertility or prosperity or power over enemies – and they were often tempted by those gods. I guess that's why Joshua essentially puts the choice before the people three separate times.

Even when they say, "yes, we will serve the Lord," he reminds them of the first commandment to have no other Gods. When they still say that they will serve the Lord, he tells them again that they have to renounce other gods and worship God only. He knows this is harder than hanging up a plaque.



But he does set up a stone in the place of worship so there will be a reminder of their commitment. That suggests to me that he realizes that the temptation to stray from God is ongoing, and that renewal will have to come again and again.



Every day, of course, each one of us gets to make those choices anew:



To remember who you are, and who you belong to.

To praise and honor God.

To commit all over again to following Jesus.

The renewal of faith is an everyday thing, but it's especially appropriate and worthwhile when we reach a milestone, go through a transition, or experience a change in our lives – big or small:



- A new job
- A new school year (or a new school)
- A move
- Retirement
- Graduation
- A birthday or anniversary
- A newly-empty nest
- A loss

Such happenings cause us to reevaluate who we are and where we are in our lives and what we are about – so we should see them as invitations to reaffirm our intention to live as God's people and to discern what God's calling is for us now.

That's true for a faith community as well. I don't think we put that all into words at our Worship Team meeting but we instinctively realized that the approach of a significant



That “again” of grace is what the people of Israel experienced with the God who forgave them again and again, who gave them second chances, who restored their hope and dignity and faith.

That grace is the touchstone of our faith. When we mark, this October, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Protestant Reformation, we will talk more about grace, because grace is one of the great theological themes of the Reformation.

We Presbyterians like to say that we are “reformed and always reforming” – there are the re-words again! – and what’s behind that is *grace*. We understand that it is because and only because of the grace of God we can recognize our brokenness, repent, rediscover God’s call, reform our priorities and redirect our energies. Without grace, there is no “re” anything. The good news of the gospel is that God is all about grace, all about second chances, all about renewing and remaking and restoring us ... all about the re-words. Thanks be to God.

Resources:

Articles by Charles Raynal (Theological Perspective), Susan Henry-Cowe (Pastoral Perspective) and Stephen C. Johnson (Homiletical Perspective) in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.