

## “The Bible: The Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary”

### Joshua 3:5

In their book, *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon tell a story about a community's struggle with racism. This was the 1960s in the Deep South, and the community of a small town was up in arms about the “commingling of the races.” Those who opposed desegregation organized a community meeting to come up with a plan to stop this from happening in their community. On the night of the meeting, the local high school auditorium was packed to the rafters with the mobilized, angry citizenry. It was explosive, mean, ugly, and heated by both the summer temperatures and the crowd's temperament. After the meeting had gone on for some time, and the atmosphere being racked with tension, an older man stepped to the microphone. He had a presence, was distinguished, and it was obvious that he was well-known and well-respected in the community. It turned out that he was the pastor of the Baptist church in town. The crowd quickly fell silent in order to hear what he had to say.

“I am ashamed,” he began with solemn tones. “I have labored here for many years. I have baptized, preached to, and counseled many people in this room. I might have thought that my preaching of the gospel had done some good. But tonight I think differently. I cannot speak to those who are not of my congregation, but to those who are, I can only say that I am hurt and ashamed of you, and I expected more.”

His short, sincere sermon given, the pastor departed from the microphone and left the meeting. Awkwardly, over the next hour or so, other people began leaving as well until the meeting adjourned having lost its bluster. Schools integrated a month later without incident. Hauerwas and Willimon wrote: “Here was a pastor, an ordinary person, who had labored for decades doing ordinary things among ordinary people, for the privilege of being a witness on one night in August.”

(source: <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/life/advice/2020/07/25/ronnie-mcbrayer-religion-love-among-ordinary-people/112362090/> **Ronnie McBrayer** Keeping the Faith) That is when the ordinary becomes extraordinary. The pastor saw God's will for love in the midst of the uncertainty and hate that was surrounding him. When we see the sacred in the ordinary moments of life, everything changes for us.

The Bible can help us to develop that kind of seeing. It is a training tool for us. As Richard Rohr puts it, “We don't turn to the Bible for a set of correct beliefs. Instead, the Bible invites us to *see with a new set of eyes* – because God is actually very different from what we imagine. Instead of condemning us, God is inviting us into a world of mutuality and vulnerability.”

The Book of Joshua which we are using for our reflection today is about such a journey for the people of ancient Israel. Their 40-year journey in the wilderness was ending, but another journey was beginning! The people of ancient Israel were about to enter the land that God promised them. This was a big step for them. The promise was made to them when they were enslaved in Egypt. It was about to be fulfilled. They had been through a lot in the wilderness where they had to learn to let go of their enslavement mentality of fear and subordination.

They had to learn the new ways of God's love and justice under the leadership of Moses. They had to trust in God's provision for them every day through the gathering of manna for food. They had to learn the law of God by heart. And here they were, under the leadership of Joshua, taking a new step on their journey as a people. Joshua was the leader who followed Moses. He was the one who was going to help them enter the land. Joshua was the one blessed by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by Moses to help lead the people on the rest of their journey. The key was for them to see the hand of God in every experience.

Their freedom came from God's love for them which rolled away the disgrace of their slavery in Egypt and provided them with a new way to build their nation, a way of justice and love. The people had to learn and relearn this lesson because it was not easy. There is always a temptation in our lives to confuse the joy of the presence of God in our lives with our needs for success, security, and esteem. We confuse what is true with what is false. In today's scripture, Joshua calls the people to prepare themselves for God's action. They had to sanctify themselves.

In order for them to receive the gifts God was about to give them, they needed to trust and to open themselves to these gifts. They had to see life through the eyes of faith. That is when one is able to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Richard Rohr writes, "The idea here is sacrifice... 'to make holy.' The right meaning of sacrifice has little to do with suffering, which is often the connotation we give to it. The biblical concept for sacrifice has everything to do with trusting in God. It is entering wholly into a holy state of confidence that God can provide us with what we are giving up." Therefore, one of the great themes in the Bible is about sacrifice. Sacrifice is about trust. One of the best ways to describe sacrifice is this: Giving up something important for something more important. In the act of giving up, lies our ability to trust and to open ourselves to God's extraordinary presence. Sacrifice and giving up our ways of power, control, or personal esteem will always lead us to seeing life through the eyes of faith.

Yet, sacrifice is not always easy for us. The false security of holding on to what we know often gets in the way of our ability to see God in the moment. Our illusions are so hidden from us that it takes these acts of intentional letting go, of sacrifice for us to be able to see.

In her book, *Sacred Threshold*, Paula D'Arcy writes, "When Harry Potter is trying to find the platform for the train that will bring him to his new school, he faces a blank wall where Platform 9 3/4 should be. Then the mother of a student who has made this trip before gives him advice. She encourages him to run right toward the platform (*the threshold*), promising that it will yield when he gets to it. That's what I am learning: to trust the amount of light I have been given and run right toward the next doorway. I no longer want to take my cues from people who are themselves frightened. I don't want to spend my hours defending the last place from which I looked. I want to move toward this force that is forever pushing through the events in our lives. And that I should have a companion for this next leg of the journey feels very simple and very true. Everything lies before us."

This lesson about preparing to see the sacred in the ordinary had to be learned over and over again for Joshua and his people and it is the same for us. We have to risk and sacrifice on a regular basis so that we can be open to the mystery which lies hidden in plain sight. Times of prayer, service, giving of ourselves and our resources, community activities, reading the Bible or sharing deeply with others help prepare us to see as God sees.

I would like to end with Lectio Divina again. This is the spiritual practice of listening to scripture deeply through the power of the Holy Spirit. The story is that of Jesus walking with two disciples on the way to Emmaus. The whole time they are walking from Jerusalem, which is about 7 miles, they don't recognize him. Only when they have a moment of contemplation and of letting go do they realize what was hidden from them in plain sight. This is from Luke 24:30-32, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. **32** They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Amen.