

"A Hidden Wholeness: Joining Soul and Role"  
Joshua 24:15

The image for this week is letting go of the armored life. We learn in childhood that the world around us is not safe for us to be our full selves and so we hide behind armor. To make this image vivid for us, a clip from the movie "A Christmas Story" came to my mind where the mother is dressing her young son with heavy winter clothes to protect him from the cold. In the process of doing that, he could not move: <https://youtu.be/PKxsOlzuH0k>. The intention was to protect Randy, but the effect was paralysis. I think this is an apt image for how we try to protect ourselves from being hurt. The armor we put on ends up stifling our souls and thus we get disconnected from that which gives us the fullness of life. But the sad reality is that we keep repeating the process of living an armored life even though the results tell us that it doesn't work. Parker Palmer writes, "So 'masked and armored,' it turns out, is not the safe and sane way to live. If our roles were more deeply informed by the truth that is in our souls, the general level of sanity and safety would rise dramatically."

It takes intentional choice and courage to join our roles in life with our souls. Our default is to put on the masks and armor that end up hurting us. Our choice in adulthood is to shed these protections by learning to live authentically from the depths of who we are.

In our scripture for today we hear of a leader who chooses to live authentically by shedding his armor and relying on God. Joshua was a man of faith who struggled to be faithful to God even as his people faced many social, economic, and political challenges. He was the man commissioned to continue the work of Moses in leading the people of ancient Israel out of slavery and into the Land of Promise. He was the one to help them to continue to uphold God's vision for their lives even while having hostile neighbors and an uncertain future. His call to the people was to choose to continue to serve God, the one who guided them through all the hardships of their lives. Joshua issued the call to them to remember that God was the center of their lives. It was a call for soulful living, a joining of soul and role, even in the midst of deep fear. The success of the other nations might have seemed alluring. Their gods might have seemed more powerful and their ways of greed and selfishness seemed like way to go, but Joshua reminded them that their relationship with God was the center of all of their ups and downs in life. Material success and the possession of the land were not the goals. Let's listen to Joshua 24:15

"<sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

The people of ancient Israel were about to enter the land they had been dreaming of for a long time. After being in the wilderness for forty years, this was their time of fulfillment. It had been a tough journey with many trials. They had left the values of slavery and greed behind them in Egypt. They had even learned about God's provision for them. And now

they were going to assimilate once more into the cultures of the world. Joshua tried to remind them to hold onto the faith values they learned in the wilderness.

- Enough: They learned through the gift of manna about only eating what they needed for the day and not storing up food for the following day.
- Trust: They learned to trust in God's provision for each day.
- Community: They learned about community life and how to work together to accomplish tasks and uphold each other spiritually.
- Interdependence: They learned that the wellbeing of the community depended on the wellbeing of all, especially those who are most vulnerable.
- Mutuality: They learned about the dangers of coveting and the importance of upholding each other in God's love.
- Faith: They learned about daily worship and prayer to renew their trust in their Creator and Sustainer instead of living in anxiety about resources and life.
- Flexibility: They learned about not being attached to one piece of land or place because we are all sojourners on this earth. Change was seen as part of life.
- Service: They learned that their work is to serve others and not be served.
- Openness: They learned about being authentic by being vulnerable.

That is what Joshua was reminding them of as they were entering the new land with its people and cultures which would pressure them to assimilate into the values of the world. Joshua's famous words of "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" as recorded in verse 15 reflect a deep faith against all the odds that say otherwise. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann often talks about this in a beautiful and powerful way saying that the faith of Israel embodies "hope against all data." The facts on the ground told Joshua and his people that there was no way they could make it in the face of the armies of the great powers of the region, but because of faith, they continued to follow what seemed impossible from a human perspective. The vision which Moses and Joshua had, as difficult as it might have seemed, was believable only through faith. I love the fact that the name Joshua is the same name for Jesus (Jesus is the Greek version of this Hebrew name). Jesus came proclaiming a similar vision for his people and for all the people of the earth despite the negative data and the facts. Jesus came proclaiming a vision of the kingdom of God as a reality within us right now when all the things around us seem to be saying that the empires of violence, armored lives, wealth, and success will have the last word.

The journey was not a straight line for the people. They had to learn and relearn this lesson of faith so many times. But every time, God provided them with someone to remind them to live deeply. Parker Palmer notes, "every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow its guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction. And the next time we are conflicted between inner truth and outer reality, it becomes harder to forget or deny that we have an inner teacher who wants to lay claim on our lives."

Today we are blessed to have Jeff Stevens share with us his experience of finding wholeness in the midst of a time of great fear. God's grace transformed a time of suffering

into a time of clarity about his purpose here on earth and his value in God's eyes. All the armor and masks of life fell off and he was able to reclaim his wholeness in powerful ways. Here is Jeff's reflection on his experience of dealing with an aortic aneurysm last year:

Sooner or later, everything falls away.  
You, the work you've done, your successes,  
large and small, your failures, too. Those  
moments when you were light, alongside  
the times you became one with the night.

The friends, the people you loved  
who loved you, those who might have wished  
you ill, none of this is forever. All of it is  
soon to go, or going, or long gone.

Everything falls away, except the thread  
you've followed, unknowing, all along.  
The thread that strings together all you've  
been and done, the thread you didn't know  
you were tracking until, toward the end,  
you see that the tread is what stays  
as everything else falls away.

Follow that thread as far as you can and  
you'll find that it does not end, but weaves  
into the unimaginable vastness of life. Your  
life never was the solo turn it seemed to be.  
It was always part of the great weave of  
nature and humanity, an immensity we  
come to know only as we follow our own  
small threads to the place where they  
merge with the boundless whole.

Each of our threads runs its course, then  
joins in life together. This magnificent tapestry –  
this masterpiece in which we live forever.

Parker J. Palmer

Amen.