

Be Here Now

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18, Matthew 25:1-13

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 26, 2008

Ten days ago, I celebrated my 30th birthday. Yes, its official. I am now an old man.

Now I know some of you think that is pretty funny, but I have been starting to feel old for a while now. Probably the first time it really hit me was during a performance of the Bridgewater College Concert Choir a few years ago, when I realized that there were several students singing in a *college* choir for whom I had been a counselor in 3rd and 4th grade camp. Then I started noticing a few gray hairs appearing in my moustache and around my temples. And at Annual Conference this year, I was reintroduced to a young guy I had previously known only as a two year old for whom I had been a regular babysitter. Now he is a senior in high school. When the kids whose diapers you changed start looking at colleges, you start to feel a little old.

Another telling sign of my age is my history as a sports fan. I was very glad to move to Virginia for many reasons, but one of the things I was looking forward to was being in an area where the hometown crowd rooted for the same teams I did, where a cheer of “go ‘Skins” is not considered heresy and “go Eagles” does not refer to the bunch of green clad weanies in Philadelphia. But I have noticed a big difference between myself and the youth and students with whom I spend a lot of my time. When it comes to the Redskins – I came of age during the glory days! I grew up on “the Hogs” and “the Posse” and I remember very well being more than halfway through the ‘91 season and honestly wondering whether they would even lose one game on their way to the Super Bowl. They grew up with Norv Turner, Marty Ball, and the Ol’ Ball Coach. And though Joe Gibbs managed to bring some respectability back to the franchise in his second stint as head coach, many of my younger friends have never known a season in which the Redskins were the odds on favorites to win any game week in and week out.

On the other hand, I just missed the glory days of BC football when I was a student. In my 4 years at Bridgewater we had two 5-5 seasons, and those were considered very good years. Now, in the midst of our first losing season in eight years, I am having déjà vu, while my friends on campus are wondering what on earth is going on.

Oh the glory days! What we wouldn’t give to go back to them. Infinite are the ways that we try to hang on to them long after they are gone. Some of you know how I am still hanging on to a small piece of the Redskins’ glory days. On every game day, no matter what I may be doing or what I may be wearing, you can bet that underneath it, I will be wearing this T-shirt – which commemorates the Redskins 1987 NFC Championship. It has been 21 years and the Redskins have only seen the playoffs 6 times since then, including their Super Bowl year in 1991. But still I have been wearing the T-Shirt religiously ever since I got it from a friend 10 years ago. Because most years recently, our memories of the glory days have been all there was to keep us Redskins fan going.

Many of you are familiar with Bruce Springsteen’s song *Glory Days*. It’s a song about this guy who can’t stop thinking about all the fun he had back in high school, and all the people in his life who are stuck in the same place. The last verse of the song is worth sharing: It goes “I hope when I get old I don’t sit around thinking about it, but I probably will. Just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory of...well time slips away, and leaves you with nothing mister but boring stories of glory days.”

As I am getting older, I am more and more aware of my tendency to look back to an earlier time in my life with more than a little bit of nostalgia. I find myself saying things like “I remember

when..." and "Back in my day..." And there is a part of me that wonders if my best years just might be behind me.

And there is a part of me that wonders the same thing about the church. Because lately, we have been spending a lot of time talking about our glory days. I have a confession to make: I am sooo tired of the 300th Anniversary of the Church of the Brethren. And I say that with a deep appreciation for our heritage and great respect for the ministry of people like the Youth Heritage Team who is visiting and sharing with us today, and of my father-in-law, Jim Beckwith, who has served as Moderator during this anniversary year and is also here today, and of all the many people in our congregation and denomination who have been deeply involved in and touched by the planning and leadership of all the various 300th Anniversary events and commemorations. But I have grown weary of it all.

For the past year, I have felt stuck – bound to a celebration I did not feel, and captive to a nostalgia I do not share. Maybe that is what is to be expected from someone who did not fall from a Brethren family tree and who does not have a Brethren name. Maybe that is natural for someone who did not grow up going to Annual Conference or Disaster Relief Auctions or to Brethren Church Camp. I came late to the Brethren tradition, and although I have been deeply influenced by the heritage and identity of the church, and by the personal testimonies and witness of my mentors and friends, not to mention those of Brethren "heroes" like Ted Stuebaker and John Kline, that tradition and that heritage is only one of many which have shaped my life.

But I don't think shallow roots has been my problem with the 300th Anniversary celebration. Because these stories have become my stories, and this heritage, my heritage. And when I was baptized, and again when I was called into the ministry, I said yes to being a part of that tradition and that heritage.

So if it is not a lack of heritage that has kept me from enjoying the celebration, what is it? I have been wrestling with that question for a long time now, and I think I may have finally found an answer in the scripture readings that we read today. In the first we have Joshua gathering all the tribes of Israel together and recounting to them their past – their shared history. Then he charges them to revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness, uttering the memorable words "choose this day whom you will serve", and giving witness to all the people that he and his household would serve the Lord. What had not sunk in with me until this reading was that this was all on Joshua's deathbed. This was Joshua's legacy to his fellow Israelites – a charge which brought together past and future in that present moment – "Choose this day whom you will serve." Even as Joshua was reminding the people of their shared heritage, he was creating a legacy which called them into a shared future.

Then in the text from Matthew, which is actually paired with the Joshua text in the lectionary readings for two weeks from now, we have a parable from Jesus about being prepared. It has never been a favorite of mine, with me not being much of a fan of biblical eschatology – texts about the coming of the end times. But in reading it alongside the last words of Joshua, I found a new appreciation in its message of needing to always be ready for the end to come.

And the thought occurred to me: the scripture chosen for the 300th anniversary theme was about being ready for the end: Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain. Unless the wheat embraces the end of the life it has known, its story is over. But when Joshua was facing the end of his life, he was not content to simply die. He left a legacy – a new calling to serve the Lord in a new time and a new place.

And it hits me that that is at least part of what I have been missing in our 300th Celebrations. I have felt like the Israelites gathered around Joshua, only in this case, Joshua just keeps talking about the past...how the Lord called our ancestors and led them to the land of Canaan, and how the Lord helped them be victorious in battle, and how the Lord was faithful to them and

brought them to enjoy the fruits of a land they did not cultivate, and on and on and on. That could have been Joshua's legacy. He could have just been the guy who took over for Moses and didn't screw things up. It wouldn't have been a bad ending for him. But on his deathbed, he called Israel to something new. It was the same calling they had before. But it was for a new time and place. He was calling the Israelites to be here now.

I have missed that in our anniversary celebrations. Although I have heard a lot of talk about launching the Brethren into a new century, for the most part, what I have seen is nostalgic reminiscing over the glory days. And I wonder if our church were to soon see its end, what would our legacy be...the one we are creating today? I would hope it would be something more than simply a reflection of the past. But I think I have felt a bit like one of those foolish bridesmaids from the parable – I have a lamp, but nothing to put in it. My heritage is the lamp, but the light is in danger of going out because I am running out of fuel and I have been so focused on the lamp that I forgot to get new fuel.

I am not sure this is making any sense for you. It only halfway does in my own head. But I am sharing it for what it is worth. Maybe putting it this way would help: I wonder what Joshua, or Jesus, or for that matter Alexander Mack and the other early Brethren would think about our celebration of the 300th Anniversary of the Church of the Brethren? I have an idea from these scriptures about the first two. And I recall an anecdote about Alexander Mack that might have shaped his thoughts. I recall learning that Brother Mack did not want his grave to be marked, for fear that someday it would become a site of pilgrimage. I remember well the irony of learning that bit of information while standing in front of a plastic encased gravestone with the initials A.M. with a group of Brethren youth on a heritage tour.

And with that thought I want to turn to a scene from the movie *Dead Poet's Society*. In the movie, an English Professor (played memorably by Robin Williams) asks his students why an old poem encourages us to *carpe diem*, seize the day. When a student's response fails to recognize the wisdom of the saying, Keating remarks, "Because we are food for worms, lads. Because believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die." He then turns the students' attention to a trophy case, filled with trophies, footballs, and team pictures – reminiscings of the glory days if you will – and says:

Now I would like you to step forward over here and peruse some of the faces from the past. You've walked past them many times. I don't think you've really looked at them. They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you. They're eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in.

The boys lean in and the professor whispers, "Carpe diem. Seize the day boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

Like those faces in that display case, our heritage usually exists as part of the background of our lives. And it never hurts to pause for a few moments and bring it to the foreground – to remember and relive the glory days. But only when it helps us to seize the present day – to be more fully and more truly and more faithfully present in the here and now. If it becomes anything more, it becomes an idol, a self-serving god of our own making that distracts our attention from the one true God.

In the spring of 2004, the Washington Redskins were in the midst of a search for a new head coach when they made a stunning announcement: Joe Gibbs was back! For Redskins football fans, it was like a miracle. Sports headlines hailed "The Return of the King" and similar lofty

words. Gibbs was as humble as was possible in that context, but the atmosphere and the expectations were clear. We were going to see a return to the glory days.

Well, it didn't turn out the way anyone hoped. The glory days were gone, and though Coach Gibbs commanded respect from the moment he arrived, and though he managed to recreate an atmosphere of respectability that had been missing from the club for years, before too long commentators were starting to whisper: maybe the best days of Coach Gibbs are behind him. Maybe the game has passed him by.

People are saying those kinds of things about the church today. That maybe our best days are behind us. That maybe the world has passed us by. That we were a Hall of Famer back in the day, but that today we are at best merely respectable.

Like the Redskins, we are not going to move forward by trying to bring back the glory days. But with an appreciation and respect for who and what has gone before us, we can be here now, working to create the glory days of tomorrow. We can be who we are, not who we once were. We can be here – rooted and grounded in this time and place. And we must be here now – alive to the present possibilities, resting neither on the laurels of our past, nor on our plans and dreams for the future. As with Joshua, we must choose this day whom we will serve, whether it be the idols of the past, the phantoms of the future, or the God of the eternal now.

Unlike Joshua I won't speak for my entire household. But as for me, I will choose the now.

Prayer

Forgive us, merciful God. So often we say that we choose you, but our actions do not match our words. Our choices reflect our priorities; we continually choose work, sports, sleeping in and any number of activities and idols over you. And our worries reflect our ultimate concerns: we worry about the economy, who is going to win the election, and whether we will fall victim to a natural disaster or a terrorist strike. In all this we send mixed messages to our children and to one another about our faith. We have such difficulty trusting you. We find it so hard to be faithful. So turn our hearts to you in these moments. Help us to be here now. To listen with ears that can hear. To see with eyes of faith. To know in our innermost being that, if nothing else, we are loved by you. O Lord, hear the prayers of our innermost hearts, as we pray that which can never be put into words.

-Silence-

O Lord, we know that you are here now. Help us to also be here now, with you. Amen.

Benediction

Chris: Our charge is the same as that given by Joshua:

A: To revere the Lord

B: And to serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Chris: Our charge is to be here now.

A: To remember our past without making it into an idol.

B: To look to the future without becoming captive to it.

Chris: So be here now.

A: Here – where the past meets the present.

B: Now – when the present meets the future.

Chris: Let us go in grace of the eternal now, who came so that we could be here now. Amen.