

**ROAR: On To
The Promised Land**

Joshua 3:1-5

When life is good, God is good!

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
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We had a great week at Vacation Bible School this week.¹ We had over 200 people involved—children, teen helpers, adult helpers—it's a major production. But what a blessing it is, too. To see all those bright and shining faces each day and to hear their voices raised together—it just brings hope to your heart. So today we are going to have a great celebration of our Vacation Bible School at 11:00 in the Great Hall of the Family Life Center, and you are all welcome to stay for that after Sunday School.

We've had a long journey this week in Vacation Bible School, and even longer because we have been talking about the VBS Bible stories in worship for the last month. At every stop along the way, and every day in VBS, we found a way to affirm that God is good—very good. At first we saw how the children of Israel were living in Egypt, and the Egyptians made slaves of them, treated them harshly, and took away their freedom. That was not fair, was it? But even when life is unfair, God is good!

Then we heard how God sent the plagues on Pharaoh, trying to convince the Egyptian king that he should let God's people go. The plagues were pretty bad and kind of scary, right? But we learned that when life is scary, God is good!

Finally the Israelites were able to escape from Egypt, and God led them to safety through the Red Sea. But the wilderness was a very different place than what they were used to. Water was scarce, and they had to depend on God for quails every night and manna every morning to have enough food. But we learned that even when life changes—no matter how it changes—God is good!

The unfairness, injustice, and fearful changes that we have to go through can make us sad. We remembered the story of the saddest time of all—when Jesus was crucified and died on the cross. Everything that his followers had hoped for was gone. But then Jesus was raised from the dead, death itself was defeated, and hope was restored. We have many sad times in our lives, too, but we learned that when life is sad, God is good!

On the last day of VBS, and for today's sermon, we are coming to the end of a long journey. Moses led the Israelites through 40 years of wandering, looked over and saw the land that God had promised, and then he died in the wilderness. Joshua became the new leader of the people, and

he took them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. It was a time of celebration and joy and gratitude for all that God had done for them.

The day before they were about to cross the river, Joshua sent people through the camp, saying “*Make yourselves holy*”—meaning they were supposed to take a bath and get in the right frame of mind for this big event—“*for tomorrow the Lord will do wonderful things among you!*”² The next day the river stopped flowing and the people walked across, just like they had done through the sea at the beginning of the journey. The people were so happy they made a big pile of rocks so they could always remember the place where they crossed the river into the land of God’s blessing. So finally we learned that when life is good, God is good! Sometimes things go right and we win the victory and we enjoy the blessings of God, and that’s good!

What does this story mean to us today? What is important not only for the children but also for the adults to remember about these foundational stories of faith?

One thing is that when the journey is hard or long or challenging, God is helping us. Nobody here has had to deal with slavery or oppression like the Hebrews in Egypt, but we have all had rough patches along the way. We feel the pain of hardship and heartbreak, and we know what it’s like to be treated unfairly, to be scared, and to be sad. But we have been talking for three weeks and most of VBS this week about the help God brings us when times get tough in our lives. God brings us peace and strength, joy and hope, and his love never lets us go. In the Book of Psalms it says, “*God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.*”³ We are so thankful for that.

But we also have times when almost everything is going right. The sun is shining; we’re feeling good; all our friends like us; our team is winning. Life is just good. Sometimes when we are having a good time, we tend to forget about God. We only go to God when something is wrong. But here is what we learned from Joshua: **when the journey is good and fun and light and interesting, God is blessing us.** God helps us in the bad times, and God blesses us in the good times. All the good stuff also comes from God, and we are grateful (or we should be) for every good thing that

happens. Many times this verse is repeated in Scripture: “*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*”⁴

One other thing I hope we all understand through this week. **God is Master of the journey, but not the manager.** God doesn’t cause the things that are unfair or scary or sad, and sometimes changes happen that don’t really seem to have a reason. God makes the world free and people free, and sometimes bad things happen. But in all these things, God is good. God loves us, hears our prayers, protects us, and gives us what we need in all the circumstances of life. God is the Master of all things and all time, but God is not the manager of every little thing that happens.

Joni Eareckson Tada has been an inspirational speaker and author for almost 40 years. She grew up in Maryland as an athletic teenager. Attending her 30th high school reunion, she ran into one of her best friends from high school, a girl named Jackie. They had played field hockey together, and they remembered the championship game when they were seniors. They played hard and well, but at the end, the other team scored, and they lost. On the way home on the bus, Joni and Jackie sat together and comforted themselves by singing an old hymn, “Man of sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah, what a Savior!”⁵

A couple of months later, Joni Eareckson graduated from high school, and a month after graduation, she dove off a cliff into Chesapeake Bay. The water was too shallow. She broke her neck and became a quadriplegic. She has been in a wheelchair ever since.

As Joni tried to recuperate from her injury and make sense of what had happened to her, she made a list of reasons she thought God could bring something good out of her tragedy. But still she struggled. She doubted God’s love, presence, care, and goodness. The list of reasons on paper were very little comfort.

One night, several years after her injury, Joni was in the hospital for a checkup. She was lying awake, full of anxieties, doubts, and anger. Her friend Jackie, who had gone off to college, snuck into the hospital just at the close of visiting hours. She hid behind a couch in the waiting room until the lights were off and the nurses were all at the nurses’ station. Joni heard

a sound and turned to see Jackie crawling across the floor of her room. Jackie peered through the bedrails, and Joni hissed, “If they catch you, they’ll throw you out of here.”

Jackie said, “Shhhh,” and let down the bedrail. She crawled up in the bed and snuggled up close to Joni. She lifted Joni’s hand, which had no feeling, and intertwined their fingers. Then she softly began to sing, “Man of sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah, what a Savior!”

Joni said, “It met my need like nothing else. And it underscored to me how good, how very good God is no matter if you are free roaming about, able bodied, or in what you think is a prison of a wheelchair. God is good. ... All things do fit together into a pattern for good. Heaven is [a] more lively [hope] to those who suffer. Your prayer life, if you go to God in the midst of your pain, will deepen. You will be made more sensitive to others.”⁶ God is good, not because we can make a list of Scriptures or statements of belief, and not because we will come to understand everything that happens, but because in the midst of our need, God comes to us. God is with us. God gives us the best gift of all—himself.

Because God is the Master of the journey, our hope is sure. The journey will end well. It will end in God. Like the people of Israel finally crossed over into the Promised Land, we will finally cross over into the land of God’s eternal heavenly kingdom. We know how the journey ends, so we can be joyful along the way.

When life is good, God is good! So our response today is kind of like Joshua’s instruction to the people as they got ready to cross the river: “*Make yourselves holy, for tomorrow God is going to do wonderful things among you!*” Joshua knew something important was about to happen. He wanted the people to be ready for what God was about to do. We need to take what we have learned this week and get ready for what God is going to do in our lives, in our church, and in our town.

Every day is a great day to be on the journey with God. Every day, we need to be ready for what God is going to do, because it is going to be wonderful. Every day, no matter what, life is good, because God is good!

¹ This sermon is what was preached at the 8:30 chapel service. The sermon for the VBS service was slightly altered and more interactive.

² Joshua 3:5.

³ Psalm 46:1.

⁴ Psalm 136:1.

⁵ United Methodist Hymnal, #165.

⁶ Joni Eareckson Tada, "Life Is Hard, But God Is Good," *PreachingToday.com*.