

Be strong and courageous

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While it is normal protocol to begin an address like this by addressing the President, I wish to begin by addressing you, the graduates, because it is your day, then to address, you, our President, because you are the leader of this university, you, the faculty, my colleagues, who have invested so much time and energy in teaching these new young leaders and of course you, the parents, proud parents, who see so much hope and promise as your children stand on the cusp of their future,

Today is a very special day. It is a day to look back on your years here and to close that chapter of your lives, to finish well. It is a day to look forward to what lies ahead.

Your valedictorian will do the looking back. I want to look ahead.

I chose for my topic “Be strong and courageous.” Many of you will recognize this as God’s Word to Joshua as he stood on the banks of the Jordan River, ready to cross from the years in the desert into the Promised Land.

You will remember that Joshua, son of Nun, was one of the 12 original spies that Moses sent to spy out the Promised Land. He was one of two who brought back a good report and said that if God was with them, they could defeat the inhabitants. The people of Israel, of course, believed the 10 who were afraid and this sent the nation back to desert for 40 years. This meant that Joshua had a 40 year training period under the mentorship of Moses. And you thought three or four years was a long time!

As we pick up the story in the first chapter of Joshua, God is instructing him. First, God assures Joshua, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” That is pretty important as Joshua’s mission is to lead the people into the Promised Land and conquer the current inhabitants. He has learned under Moses leadership that it is God who wins battles so Joshua needs to know that God will win this battle for him.

This is not just a promise for Joshua, however. Jesus gives the same assurance to his disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” And this applies to us as well.

After the words of assurance, God commands Joshua to “be strong and courageous” then to “be strong and very courageous.”

As you know from my introduction, I am the director of the Laurentian Leadership Centre, TWU’s flagship Ottawa program. I am intimately familiar with how students feel as they begin internships in politics, media and business – they are fearful, they lack confidence, “what if I fail?” is at the forefronts of their minds.

It is therefore no surprise at all that God tells Joshua once, twice, three times, “be strong and courageous.” It is important to note that God did not tell Joshua to have confidence or self-esteem. He did not say to Joshua, “you can do it.” Nor did he say, “Hey, you have been trained by Moses for 40 years, you know what to do.”

God said, “be strong and courageous.” That means to live up to who you are. It means to step out...in faith.

The next instructions to Joshua make it very clear where Joshua must place his confidence – in God. That is why he can be strong and courageous.

The next instruction is to “obey all the law” given by Moses. “Do not turn from it to the right or to the left that you may be successful wherever you go.” Obey the law but do not become a legalist. Obey the law and do not rationalize your way into sin.

How many leaders have we seen fail for lack of following the ethical path? Enron, Worldcom, the sponsorship scandal, most lately Paul Wolfowitz of the World Bank was caught using his influence to get his girlfriend a job. It is not that these leaders don't know what is right. It is that they have not trained themselves to follow it.

On Monday this past week I was having dinner with some Parliamentary staffers – code word for those who work for Members of Parliament. One of them was commenting that one thing he had to learn when he came to work for an MP was to live under authority. He had learned that when his MP told him to do something, he had to do it, even if it seemed silly.

Do you think it might have seemed a bit silly to Joshua to march around Jericho for seven days? I am sure it seemed rather silly to the people. Here they were preparing for the big military campaign against the inhabitants of the Promised Land and yet they are marching round and round the big walls of a fortified city. But did God have a plan? Yes he did and the walls came tumbling down. And Joshua did very well to live under God's authority.

That does not mean that we should not question. Nor does it mean that we should obey blindly. But there is very little focus on the discipline of obedience and living under authority in our society. And we can trust God enough to obey His commands and live under his authority. His promise in return is that we will be successful.

God goes on and commands Joshua to mediate on the book of the law day and night. Then you will not just be successful, you will also be prosperous.

The words God speaks to Joshua are appropriate to pass on to all young leaders about to embark on their life's calling. I recognize that some of you know what that calling is and are itching to get started. Others of you are wondering what you are doing next. Tomorrow beckons but it is a blank slate. Or maybe the doors to your hearts desire seem to have slammed in your face.

I want to assure you that I had no idea what I was doing with my life for quite a while after I graduated. And there have been many bends in my road that have led me to where I am today. I have felt the call of God on my life at several points – times when I know that God wanted me to go a certain place or do a certain thing. But many other times, I brought my big life issues before God and heard nothing back.

Even in my university career, I changed programs twice. I went to law school because I really did not have a specific direction. Even after I started practicing law, I gave it up for a while to go to teachers college – that was a bit of a disaster, the only thing I have ever quit.

It was not until my husband got a scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England that I felt a real life calling. When he got the scholarship, I had a strong sense that God had something for me there, but I did not know what. After we moved to Cambridge, I started volunteering with a Christian public policy centre and I was hooked. As Eric Liddell put it, “I felt the pleasure of God” in that setting. I know

some of you will find it hard to believe that about public policy but it is my sweet spot. And I have been working in Christian public policy ever since, first with the Christian Legal Fellowship, then with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and now as an academic with this institution.

And God has given me amazing opportunities. I did my doctorate in South Africa with my husband and two young children with me. We lived in France for a year as my husband did his graduate studies. I have advocated at the United Nations in Geneva and spoken to the Parliament of Jamaica.

Following God's nudgings can land you in some pretty interesting places. TWU alums are all over the world, following God's calling.

You need to know that God can use you wherever you are. If He wants you to do something specific, he will let you know. Otherwise, as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."

As you take your diploma and go out into your future, a few words of practical wisdom: learn from your mentors, be a good friend to others, practice forgiveness on a daily basis lest bitterness take over your lives, learn leadership lessons from reading the Bible, learn the lesson of living under authority, practice the discipline of obedience to God's word, draw close to Him who will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous. Be strong and very courageous.