

“THE LORD GOES BEFORE YOU”
By Rev. Marc van Bulck

I've been thinking an awful lot about our high school seniors this month. We're coming up on the end of the school semester, but anyone who is in high school (or has a high schooler in the family) knows this senior year has been...well, “a little different” would be putting it gently. I've been praying this week for students who didn't realize that the last time they waved goodbye to their friends when the bell ring might be the last time they waved goodbye...well, ever. I've been praying for seniors who didn't get to go to prom, who had to miss sports nights, award nights, and even graduation.

I'm just going to say it. This sucks. It's really difficult for us to imagine how much this COVID-19 pandemic will define this moment in history (and the generation living in it). One of the reasons is perhaps because it's so difficult to know how long it will last and when (if ever) “normal” will ever come back.

Scripture is filled with stories of generations who lived through experiences where “normal” was suddenly changed forever in very huge ways. When we think about the story of how God used Moses to help get the Israelites out of slavery, we remember that they wandered in the desert for forty years before they ever reached a “new normal” of the Promised Land. Forty years! I've been cooped up in my house for only about a month now, and that already feels like an eternity. Could you imagine *forty years* of not recognizing the world around you? Not knowing where this was all going or if there would ever be a “new life” after this one? At least right now I have Netflix!

I don't know if the Israelites had proms of their own, sports nights, or graduations. What we do know is that Moses had a goal and a dream of his own that he carried in his heart for his entire life...and tragically he never got to live to see it. For forty years, Moses dreamed of stepping across that threshold with his friends - not onto a graduation platform but into the Promised Land. Before that, he risked everything (his life, his safety...and maybe his friends did, too) to stand up for what was right... even when it meant standing up to the most intimidating people in power. All for the sake of his dream. All for the sake of completing this journey with the people he cared about the most. And he never got to do it.

Some of his friends made it into the Promised Land, but Moses wasn't able to go with them. He had to name Joshua to take his place instead. When it is time for Moses to finally face the music, God says to him, "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread...it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you." (Deut. 31:6) I wonder how Moses must have felt in that moment. Was he devastated? Was he mad? Did he feel cheated? Heartbroken? Did he grieve? Was he able to find some acceptance or make some peace with it? I don't know. What we do know is that when Moses finally hands the baton over to Joshua, he says the same thing back to him. "Be strong and bold...it is the Lord who goes before you...do not fear or be dismayed" (31:7-8).

I've never been a particularly big fan of telling people how I think they should feel. As human beings, we feel the way we feel for better or for worse, and that's just the way it is. However, even though you and I have never been through anything like this before, we know that the Lord goes before us, too. Moses hands the baton to Joshua knowing that this is a huge moment in his story, but I think he also knew deep down that this was not the end of the story. In many ways, this was just the first chapter of a much larger story that was so much bigger than either he or Joshua could possibly have known in that moment. Maybe that's true for us, too.

In the meantime, friends, be strong and bold. Know that the Lord goes before you, too, and this is not the end of your story either. Grace and peace to you this week.

Holding you in the light,
Marc