

Bangor Theological Seminary Convocation
January 26, 2009

Opening worship for a 3-day event devoted to the Old Testament, which will include the inauguration of Rev. Dr. Kent J. Ulery as the 10th President of Bangor Theological Seminary.

Julia M. O'Brien
Lancaster Theological Seminary
All rights reserved

**“Between Wilderness and Promised Land”
Joshua 3:7-17**

Change is in the air. Fresh starts, new faces, new possibilities for the future, new life breathed into our dreams.

That certainly was the mood that pervaded President Obama's inauguration last week. Folks shivering on the mall and folks glued to their screens all knew that they were witnesses to something unprecedented, something saturated with possibility. As inaugural poet Elizabeth Alexander gave it words, in that day's sharp sparkle, that winter air, anything could be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp, she sang: praise song for walking forward in that light. On that day last week, it was easy to believe that things will change for the better, that, if we work together, all things might yet be possible.

Our mood is hopeful this week as well, as Bangor seminary prepares to inaugurate a new president of its own. President Ulery has stepped forward with vision, energy, and commitment, allowing us to dream new dreams for this institution, for the church, and for the world we serve.

Of course, the electrical jolt of a fresh start is nothing new to those who have entered seminary. Whether they have come most recently from college or from another life altogether, all have embarked on this new stage in their lives in buoyant hope for the church's future and an

unquenchable thirst to be part of it. The earnestness and determination of new seminarians, their ideas and their insights, year by year, decade by decade, infuses the rest of us with hope.

In this day's sharp sparkle, this winter air, we are ready for change.

II

Appropriately, our text for today from Joshua paints for us a picture of transition. We see, through this narrator's eyes, the Israelites about to enter to enter the Promised Land. They are perched on the brink, on the brim, on the cusp of entering the land they believed was their legacy. In the past is the wilderness--its deprivations, its betrayals, and its complaints. In the past are Moses and his generation—those who murmured, those who suffered in the desert. The scene has shifted to that of a new leader and new generation ready to claim a land of milk and honey. Surely these folks are singing a praise song. After so much waiting, it is finally time to move forward.

But just as they begin to turn their faces from wilderness to promised land, to leave the past behind on their way to the future, this narrator grabs our chin and makes us see clearly that the two are not so radically different after all. Joshua's new leadership, we are told, is but a continuation of that of Moses. I will be with you, Joshua, says the divine one, no less and no more than I was with Moses. And this new thing about to be done by a new generation follows in the footsteps of an old, old story. The symbolism the story develops is crystal clear: this generation's crossing of the Jordan into Canaan is like the wilderness generation's crossing the Sea of Reeds. The stories are not exactly the same, of course. They differ in details and in the cast of characters. But our narrator goes to great lengths, in this chapter as well as in the following one, to make sure that we connect the future with the past.

We want to move forward, but our narrator slows us down. We are given incessant reminders of the past, and a plot that is slo-o-w. For a long time—two full chapters--we are left suspended between wilderness and promised land. And it is clear that's where the narrator wants us to stay for a while.

You shall stand still in the Jordan, the text says.

Rest in the waters of the Jordan.

III

In some ways, I'm glad for the delay in the narrative. I'm glad it stops where it does. Where the story of the Israelites goes from here doesn't fit so well with my liberation tendencies. That land that the text claims is promised to Abraham's descendents just so happens to be inhabited by other people who call it home: the narrator's already told that it is God's intention to get rid of those Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Gergashites, Amorites and Jebusites. If you know what's ahead in the other stories of the book of Joshua, you know that all those "ites" aren't simply going to be given financial incentives to relocate to a better home. The Pentateuch's story of murmuring in the wilderness will become in Joshua the story of conquest and killing.

The promised land is a morally complicated one in the Bible.

On the brink is not a bad place to pause.

That ability to sit still and pay attention to the complex realities of our past and our present, even as we are pulled forward into new beginnings, might serve us well, too, as we take up the theme of this Convocation—the Scriptures that the church calls the Old Testament.

Throughout its history, the church insisted that these texts provide valuable symbols for our faith and indispensable testimonies to the power and love of God. Myriads of the faithful have found hope and inspiration in these words.

But the church has also struggled to interpret these texts, as well as those that it calls New Testament. Each generation has found aspects of the Bible distasteful, even immoral. Some have chafed at animal sacrifice; some at the claim that God changes; some that the book repeats itself too much.

Our generation finds its own list of things to be bothered about: the Bible's treatment of women and children; its tendency to blame the victims of national catastrophe; its nationalism and marginalizing of the foreigner; the fact that the genealogies are just too boring. We might not be the first generation to struggle with the Bible, but our struggles are nonetheless real.

Many in the past and the present have attempted to fix these problems in some way—trying to exegete the problems away through word study or understanding the historical background of the text; by reading allegorically; by lifting up good texts over bad ones; or by creating their own canon of what in Scripture truly witnesses to God.

This convocation and the Joshua text this morning offer us a different path forward: an invitation to sit with Scripture and talk honestly together about it.

IV

We saw at President Obama's inauguration just how empowering the past can be. How we need symbols from the past to energize our lofty goals and desire to see ourselves as part of the long arm of history. In placing his hand on Lincoln's Bible, President Obama lived out his desire to see his success as a culmination of courageous stances taken in the past. In their prayers and speeches, those at the microphone evoked the hopes of the founding fathers, of Martin Luther King, Jr., the history of America's veterans, and the writers of the Constitution. The past belonged in that pregnant moment—including biblical language. The old gave energy to the new.

But to do so, they had to ignore or minimize parts of those stories. To find inspiration in the Constitution, they had to go beyond the intention of the authors of the document and even sometimes beyond its plain sense. They had to minimize the on-going struggles of race and class in the United States.

Maybe the day for inaugurating our nation's first African American president, one who embodied as well as promised a break from the past, wasn't the day to talk about all the messy truths of our founders and our nation. Maybe it was a day when the sole role of the past was to renew conviction.

But there must be times for talking about all of the legacies of the past, and it is my hope that these 3 days at Bangor seminary might be a time of talking about the complex legacies of the Bible. I invite—I challenge—us to talk honestly with each other, as people of faith, about what Scripture is and isn't; how it wounds as well as heals.

V

But, as we do so we must be willing to *face honestly our own stories*. Ancient Israel is not the only one implicated when we protest against self-interest and nationalism and believing that the goal of having a safe place to live justifies mistreatment of others. The Bible is not alone in romanticizing violence in intimate relationships or in authorizing authoritarian parenting. These stories and their moral complications are our own, and in reading them with eyes wide open we might not only come to access the past honestly but ourselves as well. We can't talk about the Bible honestly if we're not willing to be just as honest with our individual and our corporate selves.

Perhaps it's a good time to pause in our efforts to reach our own lofty goals-- of ordination, serving people, pushing ahead to what we believe God has promised us and the world—and to sit (rest, this audacious text says) in the middle, in the boundary, between past and ture.

Perhaps it is a good time to reflect on our past and how it has shaped and limited our imaginations. Just as the Moses story gets rewritten all over Joshua, so we too are shaped by what has come before—for good and for ill. Families, churches, institutions, governments, ideologies, imperfect people—they have all left their marks on us.

Perhaps it is a good time to reflect on where we see ourselves headed. Just as I wonder if Joshua understood correctly God's intentions about those other people, I also wonder how holy our own goals are. What are the limits of our imaginations? What are the moral complications of the way we've thought about God's plans for us?

Being left in the middle, between the past and the present, just might be a holy place to be.

Praise be to God that here, in the middle, is precisely where the table stands. At the table, we remember God's acts of faithfulness in the past and seek glimpses of where that story of faithfulness may yet lead. Here, we confess not only the failings of our past but also the limitations of our own visions and seek forgiveness and renewal. Here, we commit ourselves once again to each other and to the well-being of all people. Here, at this very human place, a place that remembers one who was human and gave us human food and drink, we come near to God's presence.

Sit and rest, here on the brink of a new venture. Talk and listen to your neighbors about the messy dynamics of these texts and of our lives.

Today, sing a praise song for truth-telling as well as for new beginnings.