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First Presbyterian Church

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Deuteronomy 31:1-8

Philippians 4:1-9

Holy God, on this day of milestones and memories, we pause to give thanks—for the paths that have brought us here and the possibilities that lie ahead.

Bless our graduates with courage and curiosity. Steady the hearts of parents and mentors. And open all of us to your wisdom—not only to hear it, but to live it.

Speak to us now through story, scripture, and Spirit, that we may step forward in faith, trusting that wherever we go, you go with us. Amen.

“Graduation and Commencement”

Across the country thousands of people are graduating from high school and college, so it only seemed fitting that we recognize our own graduates today – because graduation is a big milestone for both the students and their families.

Whether you're finishing high school or college, whether you're the one graduating or the one holding the tissues in the back row, the emotions are the same: pride, excitement, worry, and wonder.

The grad might wonder: Will I make friends at my new school or new job? Will I like this place I now call home? Will I be able to find my way around a new city or a new campus?

Parents may wonder: will my son or daughter find their place in this new chapter? Will they make friends? Will they find something that brings them meaning? The questions shift as our kids grow, but the heart of the concern stays the same: will they be OK?

Because graduations aren't just endings—they're also beginnings. That's why they're called *commencements*. Terry and I were reminded of this at Julia's graduation last weekend, when the president of Miami University pointed out that our programs said “Commencement 2025,” not “Graduation 2025.”

And so today isn't just about what has been accomplished—it's about what comes next.

Who will you be?

Where will you go?

What will carry you through?

To help answer those questions, I want to offer five pieces of advice—nothing flashy or profound, but simple truths drawn in part from the life of Moses, who we heard speak in our Deuteronomy passage and who knew what it meant to lead others, to face the unknown, and to trust in God's presence through it all.

You might find some of it inspiring. Some of it you may find boring. And if I'm being honest, you may not remember any of it by next week. But that's okay. Because the point of commencement isn't just to remember—it's to begin.

So advice number 1.

Find a friend. Going through life alone is lonely, and everyone needs a friend. Even in this AI world you are entering, you need a friend. Steven Levy said last week in his commencement speech at Temple University, that neither AI nor any algorithm can replicate the uniquely human connection, empathy, and consciousness that we all need. So find a friend, because everyone needs one. Even Moses needed a friend, so he found one in Aaron. Aaron was his steady-eddy companion throughout the long exodus from Egypt. But they didn't always see eye-to-eye, and there were times when Moses thought Aaron was a buffoon and vice-versa. But they were friends, and they needed each other. So find a friend, especially a friend with whom you can be your true self. Those types of friends are precious. If you find five of them in life, you're lucky.

Number two: work together. In his commencement speech to the University of Maryland, Kermit the Frog said: "As you prepare to take this big leap into real life, here's a little advice — if you're willing to listen to a frog. Rather than jumping over someone to get what you want, consider reaching out your hand and taking the leap side by side, because life is better when we leap together."

When God told Moses he was going to lead the people out of Egypt, Moses put up a big protest. He didn't think he was qualified for the job and in many ways, he wasn't. He was a lousy public speaker and he wasn't very convincing, two

important characteristics needed to get the people out of Egypt. But Aaron was both of those. So when Moses protested he didn't want the job and wasn't qualified for the job, God sent Aaron to be his right hand man, because even God knows we can't do the important stuff alone. We need help, and we need to work together. And remember, just like Moses, sometimes you'll work with people with whom you disagree, and that's OK. In fact, it might be good. You'll likely learn more working with people with whom you disagree because you'll be forced to defend your ideas and opinions. And in doing that you might find some of your ideas and opinions are dumb. And that's OK, too. Be willing to learn, and be humble, and be willing to admit you're not always right.

Number three: Some days are hard. The days you learn you're not always right is one of those hard days, but there will be other days, too. Moses had really hard days, like the one where the Israelites decided worshipping a golden calf was a really great idea, or the day when they were complaining of thirst and starvation and blaming Moses; or the day they were complaining that leaving Egypt was a really bad idea and Moses was a horrible leader for making them do it.

Yes, Moses had some brutal days. But he turned to Aaron for help and friendship (remember advice number one and two—they'll carry you on the hard days). And he vented his frustration to God—sometimes bitterly. But he kept going.

Moses showed a remarkable kind of faith: the kind that isn't flashy or loud, but steady and resilient. And that's what makes Moses memorable.

Moses is remembered mostly for how he handled adversity, not for the easy days when everyone sat around the campfire smiling happily. He's remembered for his patience and endurance; for his quiet leadership and unwavering faith; and his ability to face great challenges and work through them.

So remember, some days are hard. But you don't need to let them get the best of you. You can find joy and meaning in them.

Which leads me to number 4: don't let the hard days get the best of you. Try not to fall into a pit of despair when something doesn't go your way, or

you get a bad grade, or the person you thought was your friend turns out to be a jerk. Try to keep the faith.

The people who first heard this story about Moses were in a real state of despair; their current situation was bleak. They'd been forced from their homes and were living as exiles in a foreign country. They were POWs. And because of all this their faith in God was beginning to wane. They were really tempted to turn to other gods for survival, because theirs was nowhere to be found.

So they had to dig really deep into their reservoir of faith to believe in a brighter tomorrow. They needed to have hope; a hope that endures the hard times.

In her commencement address to Emerson College, Jennifer Coolidge said: "The best thing that happened to me is that it didn't happen to me for a very long time. It didn't happen early on. **But it** kept me going; and despite the hideous objection – and the rejection was hard, really hard -- you really can handle it." Coolidge even joked that it took her two tries just to get the commencement gig!

When days are hard, it's easy to fall into despair and become a victim of doom and gloom. I know this, because it even happens to me. But after a while, I come to my senses and remember that I'm a child of God. And so are you. And because we're children of God, we don't lose hope.

Because hope trusts that there is a God whose providence is somehow woven into this life. Hope trusts that there is a purpose that transcends my plans and desires. Hope is the confidence that things will work out, even if it's not the way I want them to work out. Hope trusts that things may come to a greater good, even though it's not what I imagined, even if it's perhaps better than I could have imagined.

And so when the days are hard, remember you're a child of God. And if you can't remember that, call me or Pastor CArrie. Or call anyone here, and we'll remind you. Because that's what we promised to do at your baptism, and that's what the church does.

And last, but certainly not least, advice number 5:

Fear not. It's the Bible's most repeated piece of advice. Fear not. God has got your back; even on the days you don't think so, or don't believe in God, God has got your back, because that's how God works.

So fear not.

Because when endings and beginnings are difficult, God walks with us, takes us by the hand, and gently leads us. I think God knows graduations and commencements aren't easy for parents or the grads. But, we don't go it alone. God walks with us and leads us in a new way to a new day.

And so I leave you with our benediction from the book of Philippians:

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸ From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Amen.

Gracious God, you go before us and behind us, beside us and within us. For the graduates we celebrate today, and for all of us walking into new chapters of life, grant courage, kindness, resilience, and hope. Help us to find friends for the journey, to work together with humility, and to trust that your hand is always guiding us. We pray in the name of Jesus, our companion and our peace. Amen.