

Wade in the Water 3: the Jordan River
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Joshua 3:5-17
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“The priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD
stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan,
until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.”
Joshua 3:17

In their exodus from slavery in Egypt the ancient people of Israel had to wade in the water twice – or at least it seemed they would. In both cases, it worked out differently than it seemed it would.

We are all familiar with the first time – their crossing of the Red Sea on dry land while Moses held back the waters – and that was the first sermon in this summer series, two weeks ago.

But few remember that they had to face the waters again – had to decide all over again if they would wade in the threatening, terrifying waters, wade in the waters to save their lives.

It was forty years after they crossed the Red Sea.

Forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Finally, after forty years they came to the boundary of the land they had been promised for their own – the land of Promise – and there they were, facing the waters again!

This time, the Jordan River, “in flood.”

Surging, cascading waters as deadly as the Red Sea.

For all the similarities, there were differences.

Forty years before their enemies were chasing them.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and his war chariots were thundering after them intending to drag them back to slavery. Only by wading in the water could they escape Pharaoh.

This time, ironically, their enemies are not chasing them – their enemies are waiting on the other side of the water.

Spies have crossed the river, and reported back that the land is full of promise, but it is also full of enemy soldiers who look big as giants. Just waiting to squash God's people underfoot like grasshoppers.

Now they are not trapped between their enemies and the water.

Now the water stands between them and their enemies, the giants of the land.

Not a few of God's people think it is just fine to have that water in between.

Only by wading in the water could they leave wilderness behind, face the enemy, and claim the promise.

And we read our text for today in the book of Joshua:

“The priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD
stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan,
until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.”
Joshua 3:17

And to that I add a second text from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”
1 Corinthians 1:18

They are surprisingly similar.

In this way.

Along with Ancient Israel, we are also people who are going somewhere.

Followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to follow him, not to stand still.

And he never told us that following would be easy!

But he did tell us that, just like Ancient Israel, following leads to promise!

The promise

"Ask and you will receive . . . that your joy may be full."

"Come to me, and I will give you rest."

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."

The promise -- to you and to me.

How close have you come to that promise in your life?

Close?

Far away?

Never quite there?

We want to be on that side of promise rather than this side.

Yet, we can't quite get there.

We can't quite make it across.

We've been right up to the boundary so many times, but we can't pass over.

We can see it, we can feel it, we can taste it, we've heard it, but we can't quite touch the promise.

Never quite past the point where life is poised to drop a giant in your path, his big foot raised to squash you?

Like Joshua's people, it seems we spend so much time on the wilderness side of God's promises.

The waters that mark the boundary are fearsome!

Who will lead us through the waters?

What kind of person must I become to follow that lead?

Those are questions basic to all people on a journey to faith.

"And Joshua said to the priests who bore the ark: 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'"

The ark led into the waters, and the people passed through the waters by passing the ark.

They passed through the Jordan in flood, a tumult that threatened to sweep them away.

How did they get through?

The priests stood in the flood with the ark.
Priests and the ark.

Just what was this ark?

Only a little box containing two pieces of stone.

On the stone ten commandments.

The inheritance of the people: from God, from the wilderness.

The ark went before them as a witness.

It said: "These people have lived wilderness; these people have met God."

They were not the same people as the slaves who fled Egypt.

They were forty years different.

They were wilderness different.

Sun-baked, hardened, tough.

But that was a minor part of the difference.

The spirit, the breath, the soul of the people were changed.

They could not have said exactly when the change took place.

Sometime during forty years of wilderness, between the Red Sea and the Jordan River, they changed from a fleeing people to a following people.

Leaving Egypt, they were fleeing everything: fleeing slavery, fleeing Pharaoh, when they saw pain or struggle ahead, they fled that as well.

Time and again they even tried to flee back to Pharaoh.

Flight was all they had in them.

If you look at a map of the Exodus, you will see that God could have led them on a direct march from Egypt, through the Red Sea, past a little bit of wilderness, to the Promised Land.

It would have been a matter of months.

Had they jumped so quickly over wilderness, could they have faced what we all must face at our Jordan?

It is hard to remember that when we finally come upon the promise, have it right in our hand, the struggle is not over!

There are still battles to be fought in the Promised Land!

Even in the midst of milk and honey, there is still wilderness!

I am fed up with positive thinking and possibility thinking, and the human potential movement, which keep saying that all we have to do is "get ourselves together" and everything in life will be all right.

I am tired of being told that life works by cause and effect: struggle now means reward later on.

Read this book, or follow these ten steps, you will be sure to get to heaven.

Lead a good clean life, and believe in God, and go to church twice on Sunday, everything will be perfect.

That is not the kind of world in which I live.

We do not live in a world goodness correlates directly with health and wealth!

God knows the principalities and powers that rule this world; which sweep us away in a flood; which keep us always just this side of promise.

Principalities so great, they have convinced us peace comes through a sword.

Powers so great they have convinced us the key to heaven is mastery over the lives of others.

Powers so great they have convinced us happiness will come through control and management and technology.

Powers so great that the good suffer, the evil prosper, and ignorance runs wild.

Primal, spiritual powers, powers that swirl around us like the Jordan River at flood.

Powers that keep us from changing or growing or becoming, that keep us from effecting the course of our own life, or anyone else's.

The waters are deep and they are fearsome.

I need more to lead me through the water than a little button with a face that says: "Smile, God Loves You"

What sign will lead us?

Joshua's people had an ark. We have a cross.

A physical reminder lifted up before us to reveal who God is.

Who is God? Our God is the one who takes all that is weak in the world – weak as we know we are – and makes us strong.
Through the power of the cross.

Power this world will never recognize.

For, "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (23,24)

The cross is all we have, but it is enough.

The principalities and powers try to hide the cross in plain sight.

They pretty it up.

The cross, like the ark, is not a sign of triumph and it is not a sign of power.

It's a sign of wilderness.

Look how many wilderness words Paul uses to describe the cross: folly, stumbling block, weak, low, despised.

That says: "There's struggle ahead and some pain as well.

But the struggle does not negate the promise, and you're not alone in the pain."

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and women, and the weakness of God is stronger than men and women." (25)

So they had an ark, and we have a cross.

But they had something else.

Listen again: "The priests who bore the ark."

Where will we find priests, who will carry the cross before us into the waters. Who will step into the terrifying barriers with this cross, proclaiming that God lives among us, goes before us. Who will wade in the waters for you and for me?

Hey – don't look up here!

Presbyterians don't have priests!

Pastor, teacher, minister – I am not a priest!

Except, in the way we are all priests.

For Presbyterians do believe that we are a priesthood of all believers.

What it means is that each and every one of us in this church today – we are all priests – all followers of Jesus Christ are priests – for one another!

What it means is, you might be the priest for me.

I might be the priest for you, but maybe your priest is sitting over there or is outside walking along the street.

At some time in our lives, every one of us needs a priest.

Every one of us needs a priest to step in the waters when the flood threatens, but we must pass through, bad as it is, to get to the promise.

"Priest" is often misunderstood, especially when we speak of the priesthood of all believers.

A priest does not have to be holy or perfect.

A priest does not have to know all the answers, or even what to say.

But it is very special for you to be a priest to someone.

When you are a priest for someone you carry the ark.

You have to take chances.

It is not for the priest to run through the waters to the other side.

When you are a priest, you stand still in the torrent.

You risk being swept away.

Swept away in a flood of fear and anger.

Swept away in a swirl of emotion and anxiety.

It's risky business to be a priest for someone standing at the boundary, full of fear and hope, faith or doubt.

To carry holiness when you know you are not holy.

I wonder who will be the priest I need?

I wonder who will be the priest you need, when you are battling the principalities and powers at the boundaries of life itself.

“The priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD
stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan,
until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.”

I do know this: not one of us can cross over from here to there until someone becomes for us a priest.

Until someone walks where we fear to walk, and stands still, holding the cross before us in deep waters.

Rejoice this day “for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Rejoice, and go ahead – wade in the water!