

“Faith Means Getting Your Feet Wet”

Joshua 3: 2-6, 9, 11-17; Matthew 4:18-22

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Our Old Testament lesson for this morning tells us that the people of Israel were camped on the bank of the Jordan River. On the other side was the land God had promised to them, the land for which God had been preparing them. They knew there were challenges over there, even giants, but they had been told that God would be with them. Who knows what plans God has for us over there?! But in between the promised future and their present location is the Jordan River . . . at flood stage.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann says, “The Jordan looms as a decisive boundary in the Bible . . . it is laden with symbolic power.” In other words, when you cross this river you will never be the same again. Boundaries are places of change. When you go through those waters you’re not the same person you were when you went in. It doesn’t matter if it is the Jordan River or baptism or taking the risk of trying to be faithful during this pandemic, or other major boundaries of life, once you go through it, you come out different than when you went in. So, understandably we’re not so sure about such change. It is risky. And we pause on the edge.

Another image is that the Jordan River is a kind of threshold. Thresholds are those places of a doorway that divides the inside of the house from the outside and the known from the unknown. It is a liminal place. The in-between. It’s not what it used to be, and we don’t know what it yet will be. In ancient and traditional cultures, the threshold symbolized what we must pass through on every risky journey into the unknown, the uncontrollable, and unmanageable. Ancients believed the threshold was a place of resistance. We didn’t want to cross it because we

didn't know for sure what was out there.

No wonder there is hesitation in crossing the Jordan! We don't know if we're ready for this, even if this is what God has prepared us for.

In this story they had been at the Jordan before. Forty years before they had been here on the banks of the Jordan ready to go into their new future. Then the twelve spies, their Long-Range Planning Committee, gave their report. They all agreed the Promised Land looked great. The future was open and inviting, except that their future land was inhabited by giants living in fortified cities. Therefore, the committee recommended that the people of Israel stay in the wilderness. Caleb and Joshua, the Youth representatives on the committee, offered a minority report. True, there were giants in fortified cities, but no one ever said it was supposed to be easy! God said this was their future and all they needed to do was follow God.

So, the Israelites listened to the "realistic" majority report and decided that the desert was not so bad after all. God promised them a future, a land, for which God had been preparing them, but because of their fears they missed it and wandered around, struggled along with no sense of purpose for the next forty years.

We find ourselves standing on the banks of the Jordan with those Israelites long ago . . . pausing. Our old fears are staring us in the face; the giants are still over there in their fortified cities. We don't want to do this, and we don't know if we can do this. And, if that was not enough, the river is flooding, and we have no idea how we will get across. A few of us are even wondering what else could be waiting out there for us. I mean, this is unexplored territory! Who knows what could happen! After the Delta variant, there is a Lambda and Sigma variant, and who knows how many more?!

Joshua stands up and says, “*Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you!*” “Get all of your things packed and be ready to move. This is a campsite, not a home-site. I know this place by the river is cozy and comfortable; we’ve gotten used to this place but this is not our home. Home is beyond the river, over there where we can do what God wants us to do. We don’t know for sure where we are going, and we don’t know what it is going to be like, but God calls to go. Therefore, get ready to move. In the morning, when the Levites, the spiritual leaders, walk by with the Ark, follow them. Follow the Ark of God.”

Joshua said to sanctify themselves. Specifically, he meant for them to go through purification rituals of commitment and preparation. More generally, sanctify is an old word which means to be set apart; to be holy. This is a serious word and holiness is a serious thing. Sanctification and holiness are words that have been shrink-wrapped by American pietism to where we no longer recognize their biblical meaning. To be holy, to sanctify, is to become like God; to become Christ-like. It means to follow Jesus Christ so much that we begin to resemble him, act like him, serve like him, love like him, forgive like him, and even die like him if need be. To devote ourselves to God so we become like God. It’s not about being nice; it’s not about being sappy, syrupy, saccharine, insipid churchgoers, but also it most emphatically does not mean becoming angry, fear-filled, gun-toting people who are outraged that change is happening, shouting that we want to go back in the past and make America great again. No, to be sanctified takes work in becoming Christ-like; it means showing up; learning the Bible, learning to pray, learning to forgive, learning to receive forgiveness, learning to worship, learning to let go, learning to follow Jesus. It’s about receiving the gifts God has given us. It’s about becoming the kind of people who get up in the morning and walk into flooded rivers because God has called them.

That night, I bet there was some soul-searching around the fires. They talked about what might happen and what they might do and how they might be changed by it all. They prayed;

they agonized. And throughout the night, out there in the darkness, they could hear their fears; they could hear the raging waters of the Jordan.

They knew they could go back to Egypt. It was conventional and predictable, a clear schedule, three meals a day, no surprises, and no risks.... They knew who they were, with a clear identity. Of course, it was slavery.

They knew they could stay where they were. After all, they had already accomplished a lot. They were free from Pharaoh and Egyptian ways of doing things. They had already taken a lot of risks and come a long way. They deserved some rest; forty years of wandering around the desert will wear a people out. And besides, what is wrong with this side of the Jordan?! Who says that the far side of the Jordan is better than this side of the Jordan? Why can't we just make our home here? Well, there's nothing wrong with this side except this is not where God wants us to be! We are called to go on; God has more in store for us, and ultimately, God has more in store for the entire world through us.

They also knew that the goal was not crossing the flooded river. The goal was to live the promised life with God and each other in the land. The goal was to be God's people who lived out a new way – different from Egyptian imperialism, different from Canaanite exploitation. Crossing the river was simply a means to the goal. But at the same time, the river was overflowing its banks and the current was rushing by with debris, upended trees, and all manner of stuff. It was not the goal, but it was an obstacle. A big one. But it was an obstacle that provided the opportunity to trust God once again just like they had over forty years before when they had come up against the Red Sea.

Just imagine what God is yet to do! God had guided them, fed them, taken care of them for over forty years, and God wasn't going to stop now. So deep down in their hearts they know

what they are going to do. They are tired of wandering around, spinning their wheels, not sure of why they are here. They are ready to go! They are ready to more fully be who God has called them to be.

Joshua tells them to sanctify themselves and wait on the Ark. In other words, wait on God. Wait, pray, listen. Biblical waiting has nothing to do with sitting around and twiddling your thumbs. Waiting on God, in the Bible, is the image of standing on the edge of a great precipice, leaning forward, and feeling the wind in your face. It has to do with great anticipation. Your heart is pounding, your mouth is dry, and your breathing is short. God has us on the edge and we are excited and scared at the same time.

Waiting means that we cannot go off prematurely, or we'll miss God. It also means that we cannot be too busy and exhausted from doing too many other things, or we'll miss God. Waiting means that we don't run over and start building a bridge of our own over the river. It means giving up self-sufficiency and learning to wait ... on God.

So, part of this call is to clear the calendar, change our priorities, and prepare. Then, when God is ready. . . WE GO! So, Joshua tells them to get ready, prepare, wait, pray; sanctify yourselves.

The next morning, the deacons come by leading the way with the Ark and the people go with them. They make their way down to the raging water's edge and sort of bunch up on the bank. God had promised that the flooded Jordan would part and they would pass over on dry ground. But the river just keeps on rushing by, sweeping with big trees, roots, limbs, mud, on top of the foaming, churning water.

Then they remembered . . . God did not tell them to stand on the bank and watch. They

had to embody their trust in God; they had to practice their faith by actually stepping into the swift current of the river. They had to get their feet wet, and when the soles of their feet touch the foaming water, then God said the waters will part.

That is the nature of Biblical faith. It's all about participation. We are to practice it, live it, embody it or it is never really faith. In the scripture we heard from Matthew, Jesus walks up to Simon and Andrew while they are fishing and calls them to follow him. He does the same with James and John while they are mending their nets. The amazing thing is that these four drop everything to follow Jesus and they don't even know where he is going. Read the rest of the Gospels; the disciples never figure out who Jesus is ahead of time and then decide to follow him. Instead, they follow and learn who he is as they go. In fact, they never really get it until after the cross and the resurrection. Even after the resurrection, the Book of Acts shows us that the disciples, the young church, never gets it completely but figures it out as they go. We're still figuring it out, still following Jesus into an unknown future.

Biblical faith and the life of discipleship is never about getting the facts straight first, and then making the most prudent decision. It is about stepping out into the middle of a flooding river and then somewhere along the way discovering who God is, what God wants to do and who you are.

Being followers of Jesus is full of risk; it is called living by faith. We don't live by certitude. Indeed, it is learning to live out of control. We're not in control. We have to give up control and walk right out into a river at flood-stage.

These days I feel like we're facing rivers at flood-stage every week and I ask God, how many rivers do we have to cross?

We must be nimble on our feet and able to improvise. Covid information is constantly changing and developing, and we try to adapt. That means we have to be resilient, the ability to bend and not break.

For many of us, when facing change and chaos, the tendency is to harden our faith and therefore faith becomes brittle, not resilient. We yearn for certitude. We want firm ground and do not have the resilience to step into flooding rivers. We want God to sit firmly on the throne of heaven, rather than being on the move calling us to follow. We want an inerrant Bible, and society organized like it was in the old days. So we harden our thinking, harden our beliefs, and harden our arteries, and like old Pharaoh, our hearts become hardened.

But hardened hearts miss out on the mystery of the life God calls us to. Joshua says in our story this morning, “Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow God will do wonders among us!” Brittle, hard faith misses the wonders God has for us.

Remember that Martin Luther King used to say, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Partly that means the arc bends but does not break; it is not brittle it is resilient.

Today is Kick-Off Sunday for the new school year and we’re hoping to jump into a much more regular fall schedule. But who knows? Will we go to more social spacing in our seating? Will we have to go back to virtual-online streaming church? What about the church’s finances and budget as we plan ahead? Can we afford a new associate pastor? And what about other ministries we need to do? We’re not sure what the world in front of us looks like but we know it’s not like what’s behind us.

The great baseball hitter, Ted Williams, offered this advice to a young struggling hitter:

“If you’re in a slump, don’t try harder. Change your stance.” What happens is that when we change our stance, we see differently, and we’ll swing differently. These days we’re having to change our stance. We have to adapt and take risks.

Austin Heights, we have a long and good history of listening to God and taking risks. Many times, we have taken the leap and then grew wings. God has led us before, and God will lead us again. Our job is to put the feet of our faith into the swollen river and walk on.

God wants to do wonders among us. Come on! Let’s get our feet wet!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all.  
Amen.