

## **Crossing the Jordan**

I Thessalonians 2: 9-13, Joshua 3: 7-17

“...the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over...” Joshua 3: 17

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October 30 2005

What a privilege it is for me to step into the pulpit of Morningside Presbyterian Church on this anniversary morning. I am deeply grateful for the year that we have had together. I am greatly hopeful for the year that is about to unfold. I am in awe of this congregation for the fact that we have come so far by faith. I am in awe of the powerful presence of God who has been faithful without fail, has brought us through some deep waters, and now is leading us now on toward a place of promise, where there are possibilities we have not yet dreamed of.

I can sense it in the air on Sundays at Morningside. I sense it in the number of babies we are baptizing, the fresh energy that is being directed towards mission and in the number of new members - seventy-four in the past twelve months. Twelve months ago, the membership stood at one-hundred-seventeen. We can sense the new spirit in the words of wonderful church members like Angie Keller. We can see it in the faces of people in church

school and people who come to worship in the sanctuary. I love those days when the church is especially full.

I think of a story someone sent me not long ago about a town in which there were three Presbyterian churches. One autumn, all three churches were overrun with squirrels. The three churches had three different approaches to solving the problem. In the first church, the elders called a Session meeting, determined that the squirrels were probably predestined to be there. Who were they to interfere with God's will? The squirrels multiplied.

In the second church, the elders, full of compassion, decided that the squirrels shouldn't be harmed. After all they were God's creatures. So, they humanly trapped them and released them outside of town. In three days, the squirrels were back.

Only the third church succeeded in curing the problem. They baptized all the squirrels and registered them on the roles as new members. Now, the squirrels are seen only on Easter and Christmas.

I am glad to see you here today, and I rejoice that we have indeed come this far by faith. I encourage us all to remember, however, that what precedes faith on our part is the steadfastness on God's part. The faithfulness of the Lord has provided the path for the survival of Morningside Presbyterian

Church as a congregation, and God's faithfulness will be the road by which we travel from this turning point on as God's people.

The Book of Joshua marks a turning point in the history of the Hebrew people. After their exodus from Egypt, they had wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Now they have come to the edge of the Promised Land. It is so close they can taste it, but it is still far away because of the wideness of the Jordan River, which lies between where they are and where God wants them to go. For most of the year, the Jordan is no problem, no more than three to ten feet deep. But in the spring, the snow on the top of Mount Hermon melts, and water rushes down into the river in great torrents. Sometimes the river can be as deep as 150 feet. How will you get to the Promised Land with a water problem like that? (I see Aaron Bertrand and other members of the Property Committee here. We do a lot of hand-wringing about our water problems at Morningside, don't we? Sometimes they seem formidable!)

God tells the new leader of the people, whose name is Joshua, divinely chosen to succeed Moses, what needs to be done next. From a human perspective, there does not seem to be an easy way to get there from here. But God has a plan, and God's people are an integral part of it, and God will not be thwarted. And so the Lord says to Joshua, "I will be with you and

with my people, just as I was when Moses was their leader and liberator. And, what I want you to do is to command the priests of the Ark of the Covenant to stand still right in the middle of the Jordan River.” The Ark of the Covenant was the most sacred of all symbols: the throne of Yahweh, the sign of the presence of the Holy One in the midst of the people. Joshua might have wondered **how** the priests would be able to stand still in the midst of the river, but he was respectful enough not to ask questions. He summoned the Israelites and told them that God had promised not to fail them, and that the time had come for them not to fail God. He told them about the priests and about the ark and assured them that when the feet of the priests touched the edge of the water, the waters of the river would stop flowing. Then, the water would stand in a single heap. Now, it’s one thing to turn the water off. It’s quite another to have the water stand in a heap. Don’t think God is trying to be a show off. God wants to make clear that God has the power to hold back not only the annoying little trickles of life; God can reverse even a great river of chaos. With the forces of disorder that are bearing down upon our world today, I believe you and I need to see the water standing there in a heap. I think we need to believe that in our own lives and in our nation and in the world, nothing, absolutely nothing, is impossible with God. Hopelessness is never an option. The only time

hopelessness is an option is when you conclude that God cannot be trusted. And then, you might as well sit down and have your pity party. What the Bible says is that God can stop the flow of a mighty river. God can reverse the course of events because God's will **is** to be done, and God will see to it that it is done.

We don't know whether the people actually believed the Almighty's wild-eyed promise, but at least, they hoped that God could do it, and so they broke camp and fell into line behind the priests. The Bible does not tell us whether they carried life jackets or not. But we do know how it turned out, don't we? As soon as the priests' feet dipped in the edge of the water, the water stopped flowing, then rose up in that heap God had promised, and the entire nation crossed over, and no one got as much as a big toe wet. Such is the power of God.

I think about this story and the insight it offers as to where we are now as a people of God. I think about Morningside's newly minted long-range plan and how much energy and imagination we have put into it. But I want to tell you, friends, that today the more important long-range plan is God's plan, in which we have a crucial role to play. What is the goal? The salvation of the world. What are we to do? We are to be the embodiment of God's grace, and compassion, and righteousness, God's plan of salvation.

As Scott Weimer mentioned earlier, the Protestant Church around the world observes Reformation Sunday today, in honor of an event that took place October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany and started the Reformation. Because Luther was protesting against certain excesses and practices of the Catholic Church in the 16th century, many people assume that to be a Protestant means to be against something. But the word “protestant” comes from two Latin roots: “pro,” meaning “to be for something,” and “testari” meaning “to testify.” To be a Protestant means to stand up and be counted. It means to advocate for that which is good and that reflects God’s holy will. I believe that God is calling us Morningside Presbyterians to be for God’s plan of salvation, to be **for** God’s future in our corner of the world and through our mission around the world in partnership with others who are working toward a future in which “justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” With God’s help, we can cross the Jordan. We **will** cross the Jordan because God has a job for us to do if we will only take the plunge.

In the 1980s, I went for the first time to a Presbyterian retreat center in Texas called *Mo Ranch*. When you go to a Presbyterian meeting, you sit in a chair and talk earnestly for five, ten, twelve hours a day. The third day we

were in catatonic states, and someone suggested that we go out and have a swim down in the Guadalupe river. Several of us put on our bathing suits and went down to the Guadalupe. If you've ever been to Mo Ranch, you will remember that there is a very high slide by the side of the river. You can slide down the slide and have a wonderful adventure. I decided I was going to do it. I climbed halfway up the steps and became paralyzed with fear. I couldn't go up, I couldn't go down. A friend from my committee climbed up behind me and he said, "Joanna, you've come to a turning point. You've either got to go up or come down. You can't stay here on the ladder. Now, it looks to me as if it would be easier to go on up because there are just a few more steps down than there are up and if you weigh your options, you'll see that it will be better to go on." I was able to pry my hands off the rail of the ladder. I took the plunge and had one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. What if I had missed it?

What if the Hebrew people had said, "No, thank you Lord. We think we will just stay here in our tents because we're afraid to cross the river." God can be trusted. Our job is to let go and move on in faith and in hope, remembering that nothing is impossible with God.

As people in the Presbytery can tell you, this church was not a place for which the Presbytery had much hope a few years ago. Yet, here we are,

coming back to life, discovering wonderful new ways of being God's people here on North Morningside Drive. No, the water isn't standing on its hind legs yet. But, by golly, I think it knows its days are numbered.

Another wonderful reassurance from the story of Joshua and the people and their safe crossing: God has a plan. That plan will come to be, and it will come to be in God's good time. The entrance into the land of Canaan was the long-awaited fulfillment of a promise that had been made to Abraham and Sarah thousands of years before. God acts in God's own good time.

Probably what slows down God's plan is the fact that people keep messing it up, and God has to keep coming back around and straightening us out.

We can also trust that God is in charge of leadership succession. After Moses, there was Joshua. After Vann Gibson came Charles Benz. After Dana Hughes, Joanna came. After me, someone else will come to lead.

Why? Because the road goes on, and we are a pilgrim people on the move toward God's tomorrow. Whoever the leader is, the people will be alright if they remember to honor the presence of God in their midst. Let God be the center, remembering always that whatever happens, it is not because we have accomplished anything, but because God has granted the growth.

Remember the great motto of the Reformation? "The church reformed, always to be reformed." We bear witness to the living God who is on the

move among us, who helps us correct our course, who protects us through the deep waters, and inspires us to step up to the challenges of a fresh chapter. Because we trust God, whose nature is fully revealed in Christ Jesus, we are brave enough to pray, even in the midst of the raging waters:  
Oh God, bring us out of chaos and into safety. Bring us from fear to faith.  
Bring us from darkness into life. (1)

In the early nineties, I lost a friend, a beautiful young friend. She was twenty-three years old and died of leukemia. Because I was also her pastor, she let me into her heart and her life and let me journey with her as she came to the end of her time on this earth and crossed over to the other side, where there will be no more mourning or tears or pain. My most vivid memory of those months we shared together was the day Madeline said to me, “Joanna, I have found the Scripture that is going to see me through.”

“What is it?” I asked, thinking that I would hear a passage from the Gospels: “In my father’s house are many mansions” or “I am the resurrection and the life” - or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Never in a million years did I expect to hear a verse from Joshua.

“Listen to this,” she said, as if she had just discovered the secret to life, “I hereby command you, says the Lord, be strong and courageous; never be

frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God, the Lord is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

Friends in Christ, if you trust that, it will turn out to be true every time. Just ask the Hebrew people. You will find them on the Canaan side of the Jordan.

Notes:

(1) paraphrased from a prayer of Frederick Buechner.