

Wet Feet

Joshua 3:7-17

Let us pray....

During their journey to the Promised Land God continues to be faithful to the people of Israel. Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea. When confronted with hunger God rains down manna from Heaven to feed His people. When they thirst God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff and fresh water flows to fill their canteens. When Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to be with God the Israelites lose faith and build a golden calf. God does not strike them down but sends Moses down the mountain with the tablets we know as the Ten Commandments to guide them.

Every step of their journey to the Promised Land God has been with the Israelites and the River Jordan that marks the entrance to the Promised Land is in sight. And then Moses is called home to Heaven. Yet even though Moses has died the Lord comes again and speaks to Moses' next in command saying "Joshua, my servant Moses is dead. Now cross the River Jordan and lead the people to the Promised Land I have given to them."

Easy enough Joshua thinks to himself. For you see the Jordan River was not a mighty river like the Nile or the Mississippi. It was a calm narrow river that meandered from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south.

But Joshua's task was not going to be easy at all for a lot of reasons. First of all, the Israelite people, desert dwellers, were terrified of water, especially rivers. They believed that dragons, what we would today call crocodiles lived in rivers and to go and stand in the middle of a river was like walking into a lion's den wearing a robe made of porterhouse steak.

Then there was the question by the Israelites "Who is this guy Joshua to tell us to stand waist deep in the middle of the river. Moses was able to part the Red Sea with a wave of his hand. Why can't Joshua just part the waters of this measly river?"

With their words the Israelites reveal that they had stopped trusting in the future promise of God spoken through the words of Joshua and put their trust in who they had previously experienced, the man Moses. And now he was dead.

God hears the grumblings of the Israelites and speaks to Joshua “Today I will begin to glorify you in the eyes of all of Israel so that they may know that I am with them as I was with Moses. Tell the priests that carry the Ark of the Covenant when they reach the edge of the River Jordan to go and stand in the river.”

Joshua believing in the loving promises of God, in faith calls together the leaders of his group and tells them “This is how you will know that the living God is among you. See the Ark of the Covenant, it will go into the River Jordan ahead of you, and as soon as the priests who carry the Ark of the Lord set foot into the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.”

Through Joshua’s witness of God’s presence, their faith in God is renewed and the people of Israel break camp and head for the River Jordan - the priests going before them dressed in their jeweled flowing robes carrying the Ark of the Lord. What a magnificent sight that must have been – 40,000 people following in faith after the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A handful of years ago I went with a group of colleagues to take part in a week of training and spiritual retreat. Part of the training focused on teambuilding. For one exercise we were divided into groups of six and loaded into rubber boats for an afternoon of whitewater rafting.

After putting on wetsuits and helmets we pushed off into the peaceful calm water of the river. But we all know that rivers can be unpredictable and soon we found ourselves in rougher water with waves breaking over our boat. Before we knew it we were in a section of rapids where we had to steer our boat around boulders and whirlpools. Next our guide told us that a fifteen foot drop was coming up around the next bend. “Just have faith and hold onto the boat when we go over the falls.” “Just have faithhhhhhhh???” someone yelled as we went over the falls and headed deep under the driving water of the river.

Like our rafting expedition, Joshua approaches the River Jordan and sees not a peaceful meandering river but a raging river flooded by rain and the melting snow of Mt. Hermon. Yet because of Joshua's witness, the people have faith that God is with them and they walk onward with the Ark of the Covenant to the banks of the River Jordan.

When the priest's feet touch the water's edge the river ceases flowing and they carry the Ark of the Lord to the middle of the river and stand on dry ground. The people of Israel see again that God is with them and in faith, in faith, walk into the river until the whole Israelite nation stands on dry ground on the other side in the Promised Land.

When the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, God was shown to them as a God who liberates. In crossing the river Jordan, God was shown to them as a God who provides and provides richly. Forged out of their experiences of their wilderness journey the Israelites receive a new crossing – a new beginning – a new mighty act of God where the chaos of the waters are harnessed to reveal His new providence.

In life and in the church we can always find river crossings where we are summoned into the deep waters of the soul - birth and death, comings and goings, loss and gain, grief and joy. But these river crossings through faith do not have to paralyze us, but actually propel us forward to a new Promised Land.

It was Joshua's faithful witness to God's promise to provide that allowed those twelve men in faith to wade into the River Jordan. It was the sight of God in their midst in that dry riverbed that gave the people of Israel the faith to walk forward into the Promised Land.

I'm here to tell you that being part of a community of faith is not a spectator sport. To be a community of faith you need to do more than just sit on the sidelines and cheer or maybe even jeer. To be a community of faith is certainly about what we proclaim but also how we walk in faith.

The Apostle James tells us that “Faith without works is dead.” Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and minister with nothing more than the sandals on their feet and the cloaks on their backs and faith in their hearts. And when they did go forward in faith with Jesus, God provided for them and their ministry each and every day.

On this Reformation Sunday we are reminded of St. Paul who tells us that to lead a life worthy of God begins with faith, begins with faith that God is with us always and loves us with an unceasing love. On this Reformation Sunday we think of Martin Luther who risked all to act on the words God spoke to him. And when Luther acted in faith God provided a new beginning for the Christian world.

Joshua preached the Good News of God’s love and the people walked forward in faith. The journey was long and still fraught with peril. The waters of the river were turbulent. But God stood before them calling them to a life with Him, a life of freedom in the Promised Land, a life of faith that allowed them to walk fearlessly into the waters of the River Jordan. And through their faith and faithful action, wet feet and all, they were to experience a God who continued to provide a new beginning, a new life for them in the Promised Land.

So I ask you this morning what do you have to see or hear or experience to have faith in God? What calls you to wade in the waters and journey forward in faith to the Promised Land God has in store for you and this church? What is God telling you is required of you to lead a life of faith in Him?

Here we are at the river’s edge. Risky business, but it’s not just an ending. It can be a new beginning. The choice is yours.....