

“Crossing the River”

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Joshua 3:1-17

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I don't know about you, but for me it seems that sometimes life is just flying by and the days and weeks seem to run together. One reason for that, I think, is because much of life is very routine. Most of us tend to do pretty much the same things week after week. We go to the same job every day in the same place with the same people where it seems we have the same conversations. If you're still in school or you have kids in school you have a set routine as well. Get up, get everyone dressed, lunches made, books packed, out the door on time, picked up again in the afternoon, homework, soccer practice, dinner and back to bed. This day-to-day routine of life is rarely memorable.

But then there are those events in our lives that are major milestones. Those are the things that we remember forever. Some moments in our lives shape us and make us into who we are today. For example, your wedding day was probably pretty memorable. For some of us an illness or some kind of tragedy, maybe the loss of a job. Today is Mothers' Day and so we're reminded that the birth of a child is one of those life-shaping events. In the same way, graduation is a pivotal time in life as well – not the actual commencement or the activities that are involved in graduation, but rather the change in the direction of your life from this moment forward.

Admit it, you were all wondering how I was going to combine Mothers' Day and graduation. Both of these events, and many others like them, change the rest of our lives. These events become an important part of who we become. The Bible records several of those kinds of events for the nation of Israel and crossing the Jordan River is certainly one of the most significant.

Our Scripture reading this morning from Joshua 3 describes the Israelites crossing over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, fulfilling the promise made to Abraham 500

years before. In the process, they experienced the power of God in a mighty way.

According to this passage, there were two things that happened in order for the people to cross into the Promised Land – the miracle of God stopping the flow of water and the obedience of the people to actually cross over. You see, this was not the first time the Israelites had been here. Forty years earlier, after escaping slavery in Egypt, God had led them to the bank of the Jordan. Moses sent spies into the land to check things out and when they returned they described a land flowing with milk and honey. But they also described a land filled with giants. Despite the efforts of Joshua and Caleb, the other ten spies convinced the people not to follow the Lord and cross into the Promised Land.

As a result of their disobedience, God forced the Israelites to wander in the desert for the next forty years, finally arriving back at the bank of the Jordan. Now they are faced with the same decision as before: to obey God and cross into Canaan or to turn and leave. This time they choose to obey and as a result they receive the blessing that God has promised them.

Obedience at this point, however, takes a whole lot of faith, particularly on the part of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Verse 15 tells us that the river was at flood stage and had overflowed its banks. That means that the normally calm Jordan River was now a raging flood. God requires the priests carrying the Ark to step into the river before performing the miracle. Verse 13 tells us that only after the priests step into the river will the water stop flowing.

Now more than likely, because of the steep river bank and the high water, stepping into the water meant getting in quite deep, maybe waist deep or even up to their necks. Not only that, but because of the time it would take for the water to drain downstream after it stopped flowing upstream from them, they would have been in

that fast-flowing water for some time. They had to step out in faith before they experienced God working in the situation.

I think it's the same for us much of the time. God brings us to a place in our lives where we have to make a decision to trust him or not, a place where we can't see exactly what lies ahead. Sometimes he brings us to an insurmountable obstacle that will take a miracle to overcome. At that moment we must be willing to step into the water, trusting that the God who created this world, the God who came to earth as a man in the person of Jesus, is willing and able to do amazing things. In verse 5 Joshua tells the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders (or miracles) among you."

One more thing I want us to see in this passage is the emphasis on the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was basically a large box with a lid on it in which they carried important objects like the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments as well as the other writings that contained God's laws. But it was more than just any old box. In these 17 verses the Ark is referred to 11 times. In verse 4 the people are told to stay at least 2000 cubits away from the Ark. That works out to about 3000 feet or a little over a half mile. By the way, this is probably an exaggeration. What Joshua is saying is, "I don't want you people getting too close to the Ark. Just stay a mile away from it."

What we need to understand is that the Ark represented the very presence and power of God. By having the Ark go before the people to show them the way, the Bible is really saying that the Lord was going ahead of them and leading them. Joshua wants them to keep a safe distance from the Ark as a way of respecting the power of God. The Lord is holy and as they have come to know, that holiness is dangerous.

By focusing their attention on the Ark, Joshua is commanding the people to trust in God to overcome this obstacle and to deliver them safely into the Promised Land. Following the Ark is an act of obedience to God. They are to expect to see God's power displayed.

He's calling us to do the same thing. For you graduates this is an exciting time of life. The next few years will be like none you have experienced before and probably like none that you will experience again. In addition to the good times there will be many challenges ahead. God has brought you to the river. For all of us the truth is that every day, not just during those memorable moments but in the routine of life God is asking us to trust Him and follow Him. Every day He brings us to the bank of the river and says, "do you trust me to get you to the other side?"

Because the Ark contained God's law, it represents all of His Word, the Bible. When we come to the river, to the place where life is uncertain ahead of us, God says, "pay attention to my Word and follow me." The only way to get across the river safely is to spend time often reading the Bible, praying, trusting Jesus to walk with you and to get you safely to the other side. And He will if you follow in faith. Because He who began a good work in you will be faithful to bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Amen