

“Crossing Over”

Joshua 3:5-17 • Philippians 1:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 27, 2018

At the end of his presidency, President George W. Bush was asked to describe his time as president. He replied, “the days were long but the years were short.” I think that pretty well describes life. Having my youngest child graduate from high school a couple of days ago has kind of forced me to reflect on how fast life seems to go by. As I was looking through some pictures I was amazed that photos I thought were maybe a year old turned out to be two or three years old.

One reason I think time seems to slip past us like that is because much of life is very routine. Most of us, once we’re out of school, 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. Even 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 absolutely necessary but it’s rarely memorable.

But then along come those events in our lives that are major milestones. Those are the things that we remember forever. Those are the moments in our lives that shape us and make us into who we are today and who we will be in the future. For example, last week we celebrated a wedding. Your wedding day tends to be pretty memorable. The birth of a child is certainly one of those life-shaping events. Today is what we call Baccalaureate Sunday. We just honored these two young ladies who have graduated from high school. Graduation is one of these pivotal times in life – 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, which is why the graduation ceremony is called “commencement,” which means

beginning. Graduation is a time of new beginning.

The Bible records several significant, future-changing events for the nation of Israel, events that they would tell to their children and grandchildren, events that the entire nation would celebrate year after year. One of the most significant events for the Israelites was crossing the Jordan River into the promised land, fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham 500 years before. In the process, they experienced the power of God in a mighty way, much like they had experienced when they escaped Egypt, but also very different.

According to this passage, there were two things that happened in order for the people to cross into the Promised Land – one was the miracle of God stopping the flow of the river, which we’re told was at flood stage, and the other was 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 sometimes brings us to the banks of the Jordan, so to speak. He 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. Questions like where to go to school or what career to pursue or who to marry are opportunities to seek God's will but also to step out in faith. Deciding how much to give back to God out of what we earn is one of these decisions to trust Him. Sometimes God brings us to an insurmountable obstacle that will take a miracle to overcome. The doctor calls with the test results. A spouse says, "I'm leaving." There's not enough money to pay the bills and still buy groceries. Those are the moments 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." He's saying, "God is going to do some amazing things. But you have to be ready. You have to trust Him. And you have to step out in faith." And friends, God is still in the miracle business.

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 like 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 symbolically 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.