

Crossing Over into the Promise

A sermon delivered by Keith Herron, Pastor, Holmeswood Baptist Church, Kansas City Mo., on October 30, 2011.

Joshua 3:7-17

Joachim Jeremias once observed about our journey through life, “We come from God and we go to God, and in between we live in tents.” Over the last few months, we’ve been living in that saying as we’ve journeyed with Moses and the people of God out of Egypt and across the Sinai. Here we are, four centuries after Joseph made it possible for the Egyptians to feed the Israelites, we’re standing with the people of God on the banks of the Jordan River ready to cross over to the other side to the land promised by God as their home.

Imagine, if you will this scene. Behind you are the mountains of the desert that lay in modern day Jordan. Across the river lay the craggy cliffs of the central highlands of the Promised Land. It is arid and warm and the sun shines brightly. The air is unusually heavy because you’re standing 2500 feet below sea level. And before you, the swollen waters of the Jordan River flow by silently and powerfully in a never-ending flow of water. The heavy spring rains and the melting snowcap of the mountains swell every year at this time and what is usually a passable stream has become an overflowing river pressing hard downstream.

Joshua, your new leader, instructs you to step into the river up to your ankles. You do, and you feel the water lapping at your legs as it flows by, down to the lowest hole on the face of the earth where it will bake under the gaze of the sun until it gives its life up to the sky leaving behind the rich silt and minerals of the lands from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel. You wonder how the tribes of Israel will cross.

Then it comes back to you as you remember the stories of your mothers and fathers who told of the mighty acts of God as they crossed over out of Egypt.

The return to Canaan mirrored their leaving Egypt. In both cases, leaving Egypt and entering Canaan, this story has become a part of their life story. Over the centuries this is what they point to as the evidence of God's salvation. And it's our story too. Just this week, we recall the image of crossing the river as an image of heaven.

I

The Bible helps us understand our stories. We understand them as stories that mark the work of God in our lives. So this story of crossing the river has been shared among the Hebrews and Christians for centuries and the point of the story is to instill a deep and abiding confidence in Yahweh to deliver us out of our slavery and bring us home.

John Claypool reminds us that our stories of faith are only one generation from becoming extinct. What he tells us is that one of our functions in the church is to be telling the stories to one another, to keep telling the story behind the story, to keep reminding our children and ourselves what our story of faith is.

In this book, we are given the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are given the stories of Moses and Aaron and Joshua. We are given the stories of Jeremiah and Job. And later, we are given the stories of Jesus and James and John and of a little man named Paul. We are also told of the great faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus, of Mary the Magdalene, and of young Timothy.

We are a story-telling people and the characters of the Bible are a mixed cast (some are brave while others are timid; some are heroic and a few are scoundrels). But the point of it all is that we receive the stories as a collective whole and then commit ourselves to keeping them alive by giving them meaning over and over again. Our task is to keep telling "the story behind the story" so that they continue to have meaning. The stories can lose their meaning unless we remind ourselves why they're so important to us.

Claypool tells the story of a man who pulled a silver bullet from his shirt pocket and his friend asked, "I don't want to be personal, but that's an unusual thing to be carrying around with you." The other man answered, "I know it's unusual, but

this bullet was given to me by my grandfather, and I have been hiding it over my heart for thirty years now, and it's a good thing, because one day this bullet saved my life." "How was that?" the other man inquired. He said, "Well, I was walking by a hotel one day, and a berserk Gideon threw a Bible at me. It hit me right here and if it hadn't been for this bullet, I would have been killed."

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons this story is so funny is because of the story that lies behind it that must be told. The story is comical because it's the story behind the story that makes it funny. While the stories of faith are usually not told for comic effect, they are told in order to shed some light on our own faith struggles. We can look over the shoulders of all those wonderful Biblical characters and draw some inspiration from their experiences. When we tell their stories, we're telling our own.

II

In the two river crossings, we are given the whole picture of what God wants to do with his people. "Crossing the waters" has always been an image of deliverance for people of all time. To stand on one shoreline and to look longingly over across the waters to the other side is to image the drama of deliverance. The water is a barrier in our minds that holds us back and prevents us from escaping. The Israelites must have worked fields near the shore of the Red Sea and could have almost tasted freedom but never felt that they could escape. The water was wide and the terror of the deep and the strong currents must have constrained them from acting on their impulse to find freedom.

When Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush, he understood God had heard the cries of his people and was ready to deliver them from their persecution. Moses acted on the voice and at every turn, God acted to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt.

But even that kind of deliverance did not mean that they were released from their weak faith. They struggled with their identity as the people of God the whole time while wandering in the deserts. They faltered while Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the 10 words on tablets. They exercised weak faith when faced with the promise of daily manna, grumbling that they ate better with the little offered them back in Egypt. They faltered whenever they were at the border's edge and sent the spies in to determine their enemies' strength. Faced

with a land of giants, they were too weak in their faith to see that they had the power of God escorting them back to the land that was theirs by promise through their spiritual forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Actually, whenever you look at the people who crossed over the river the first time, all you see is weak and powerless faith at work. The miracle was not in the crossing, but in the way in which God remained faithful to the promise even in spite of the people's weak faith. They had all the signs and all the assurances God was indeed with them but they couldn't keep their hands to the plow and faltered back into the safety and certainty of slavery. The slavery in the desert was slavery to their weak faith.

Joshua was the one with the strong faith. He was of the New Generation who had heard the stories of his forefathers and foremothers and he drew strength from their stories. He helps us understand the importance of letting the story behind the story be a pool of resource for our own faith.

One of the purposes of this story is to tell of the passing of the torch of leadership from Moses to the new leader that God had put the blessing on. When you read this story, you can almost read into it the passing of the torch from Moses to Joshua. Joshua receives the word from God about the processional of the Ark of the Covenant passing before the entire people, and the instructions given to them to follow that Ark through the River Jordan.

III

It is a crossing that is every much as dramatic as the crossing of the Red Sea only there is no army pursuing them from behind. Instead, the armies they must fight lay ahead of them in the land of their fathers. In crossing the Jordan, they are moving towards conflict and terror by crossing the river. What a difference! This is a strong act of faith now on their part by following the Ark of God across the river while the waters are held back as they cross.

And what do they do when they cross safely over to the other side? The fourth chapter of Joshua tells us they gathered stones out of the middle of that dry riverbed and built an altar at Gilgal to commemorate their return to the land that had been given to them years and generations before. This event linked them back full circle back to the arrival in Canaan back in the 12th chapter of Genesis.

They were home again!

Do you understand the story behind this story? What is Holmeswood doing and where are we headed? Do we have any rivers to cross? Are there any giants living in the land across the river that we must face? Are we ready to cross the river and to follow the Ark of God as a sign that God is with us? Are there leaders who are ready to stand in the middle of the riverbed that will help keep the river from flowing?

I think we're ready for the torch of leadership to pass to a new generation. Who will that be that accepts the challenge and steps forward? To those of you who haven't been here for the past fifty-six years, this is your church and perhaps the calling of God is for you to step forward and begin asserting your calling as the new generation that will give leadership to the future. Maybe you've sat back because this church has always had a steady hand of leaders to give it stability and assurance.

But now, we stand at a new day, your day has come and we need you to come forward and to offer your gifts and to take your place as the leadership that will guide us into the future. Are you up to the task? I don't know. That's what we've yet to determine. That's the act of faith that stands before all of us. Everyone here is faced with the task of looking into our hearts and seeing if we are ready for the challenge of crossing the river.

Let the words of that great historian Will Durant close our thoughts this morning: "Come now, before we die, let us gather up what we have learned and pass it on to our children." That's our calling: To pass on our stories and the stories behind the stories so that the faith will live on!