

BE READY TO GET YOUR FEET WET

Sermon, November 5, 2017

All Saints Sunday

Text: Joshua 3:9 – 4:7

It had been over forty years since the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt and crossed the miraculously parted waters of the Red Sea. Forty years of subsequent wandering in the wilderness, and now it is finally time to enter the land promised to them by God. Moses is now gone; Joshua is the newly appointed leader, and it is Joshua's mission to finally lead the people into the Promised Land. But first, they have to get across the Jordan River, which is now at flood stage; the waters are so high that the banks are overflowed. Estimates widely vary, but some historians and scholars put the population of this nomadic group of Hebrews at this time of being between two and three million people.¹ As all these people stood there looking at this large swollen river before them, I'm sure many of them were wondering if God would "do it again."

They remembered the miracle at the Red Sea forty years ago. The older ones like Joshua and Caleb had actually witnessed it first hand, but the others had certainly heard their parents tell the story time and time again of the parting of the Red Sea and the subsequent drowning of the Egyptian army. That's not something you forget. Besides, for those older than, say, fifty, forty years really doesn't seem that long ago. I'm sure the entire population knew all the details of that story: Moses had raised his staff, and God miraculously divided the waters right before the people's eyes. First, Moses raised his staff, second, God parted the waters, then third, they all saw the dry land and crossed over. Now, as they stand here at the banks of an overflowing Jordan, I'm sure they wondered -- would God do the same thing? Would He miraculously part these waters so they could enter the Promised Land?

We are told that Joshua sent word down through the ranks that God would indeed do it again. This swirling body of water that raged between them and their destination would indeed be parted. However, the details of this crossing were going to be a little bit different. This time, the priests were told to lead the people right *into* the water, and the water is not divided yet! Verse 8 – "*When you reach the edge of the waters, go ahead and stand in the river!*" Now, as the priests started leading the people toward that rushing, overflowing river, you have to wonder if some may have had their doubts. Maybe they were wondering if Joshua was really going to make it as their new leader. Maybe they were muttering among themselves, "*This isn't how it's supposed to be done. This isn't how we did things forty years ago. First, God is supposed to divide the water, then we walk through. If Moses were here, he would never have come up with this plan.*" I can even hear them muttering what some have dubbed the Seven Last Words of the Church – "(1) WE'VE (2) NEVER (3) DONE (4) IT (5) THIS (6) WAY (7) BEFORE!" Well, that was then. This is now. Now, God expects His people to have learned something over all those years they've been walking with Him and experiencing His intervention along the way. He now expects them to have faith in His faithfulness; He expects them to step *ahead* in faith and obedience.

Our text tells us that it wasn't until the soles of the priests' feet touched the Jordan River that "... *the waters from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a great heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan (v. 16).*" It was as they *stepped into the water* that the water receded and they watched in amazement as the river waters divided and the dry riverbed miraculously appeared. The priests went on to stand in the midst of the now-dry riverbed, carrying the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. As they stood there with the Ark, all the people went on and passed by on dry ground. Most of you know the Ark contained the original stone tablets of the Commandments, so the Ark served as a visible symbol of the Law of God. It also served as the visible symbol of God's presence that traveled with the people, even when (*and, perhaps, especially when*) they are passing through deep water. As literally demonstrated here, to walk in faith and obedience *is to follow God's law no matter what*, even if it seems to be leading you into a flood of difficulty.

That is what it really means to take a step of faith. Faith means trusting even when we haven't seen the miracle yet. Faith means trusting in the promises of God, following God and His good law, even if it looks like He is leading us right into a flood of difficulties. If you are facing a great challenge or obstacle, don't assume God will part the waters for you before you have to step out and act. You may have to take any number of risks, you may have to make a move, you may have to take on opposition, you may have to experience any number of potential

¹ I incorrectly said Sunday 4-6 million; my bad. Estimates of 2-3.5 million are based on census accounts such as Numbers 26:51, which lists the total number of adult males aged twenty and older at 601,730, which doesn't include the Levites, women, children and the elderly. For a much more detailed explanation that will probably tell you more than you want to know, see <http://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-exodus-route-population-of-jews-hebrews.htm>

conflicts. If you are called by God to do something or go somewhere, don't assume it will be easy just because God called you to it. In fact, if God called you to a mission, assume it will be hard ... hard enough to require the exercise of your faith. As this story illustrates, more often than not the miracles will come as we start taking steps to walk in the right direction, in obedience and faith. By the way, you can't just stick a toe in the "Jordan." You can't keep flirting around the edges of commitment. I can guarantee you won't see any miracles until you commit yourself to whatever God is calling you to do and step up to it ... and be ready to get your feet wet.

Joshua selects twelve men and sends them back to get the rocks from the middle of the river. Note that the twelve men had to go *back* to get those rocks. There's a sermon in itself here, but that's an extra test of faith for these twelve; after all, they had to remember what happened to the Egyptians! They had to be wondering, "*How long is God going to keep holding these waters back? Aren't we pushing our luck?*" But the priests are still out there, bearing the Ark of God; as our choir just sang, they are still out there literally "standing on the promises of God" ... so the twelve men go. We then read later, 4:18, "*And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before.*"

So, they build this memorial, a memorial that marks the place and time they have crossed over. By crossing over they have left behind the life they knew in the desert; the life of slavery they knew in Egypt ... there is no going back. The memorial marks that they have now committed themselves to the future of hope based on what they were promised. Do they know just how they are going to possess that land which they have entered? No. Is there a lot of hard work ahead? Yes. In fact, the imposing, formidable walls of Jericho are probably within view. But they have committed themselves to following God's lead, and they plan their future accordingly. They will take that road ahead, come what may, one step at a time.

(The following was edited out on Sunday due to time constraints; I include it here) We tend to think that if we can just make it to the Promised Land, all our troubles will be over. But don't confuse the Promised Land with Paradise. There is quite often still a hard road to take even after we arrive in the place where we are called to be. Someone may have spent a long time in the desert of unemployment, and then thought he would be happy if only he could make it to the Promised Land of having a job. But then that person discovers the hard work involved in keeping the job. And before you know it that person begins looking to the Promised Land of retirement, but many people have found that retirement isn't exactly paradise, either. Maybe when you were dating, you thought marriage was the Promised Land. But then you had your wedding, you crossed over, and the hard work began, and maybe you began to think, "Oh, but when we have children, that'll help settle things down and it'll be easier." Ha.

Just because what you are doing may be hard, it doesn't mean that it isn't right! Just because something is difficult doesn't mean that it isn't good, even sacred. As this story illustrates, more often than not God is found in the midst of our greatest obstacles, and He's waiting to show us the most miraculous things as we step forward in obedience and faith. I can guarantee we won't see any miracles until we are ready to get our feet wet, stepping in with both feet, fully committing ourselves to the calling at hand. Again, don't just stick a toe in the Jordan. If we just commit to following God and His good law no matter what, we will find His salvation and deliverance along the way.

One last thought: Why the memorial? The text is clear that God had the people erect the monument of stones not only for *their* remembrance, but for their children, and for the children who would follow after them, generation after generation. 4:6, slightly paraphrased: "*When your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' You tell them what happened here!*" This stone monument memorializes God's faithfulness ... past, present and future. **This memorial marks God's faithfulness in the past:** He opened the way for them to enter as they took those steps of faith, and crossed over into the Promised Land. **It is a memorial to the present** ... it is built at the place where they started their life in the Promised Land, marking this as their home. This is where they now belong. There is no going back. **It also a memorial to the future.** This monument attests that God will keep His promises, thus serving as a constant reminder that they and their children can build their future on the promises of God.

Centuries later, the Bible tells us of another Joshua at the Jordan; Joshua's name is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek name Jesus. This New Testament Joshua is the one who will lead the people of God into the eternal Promised Land. There is great symbolism here that the New Testament Joshua was baptized in the middle of the Jordan, not far from the exact spot where his Old Testament predecessor let the people across. The New Testament Joshua would also direct His people to preserve a memorial ... the memorial of this Table (I pointed to the communion table). **This Table memorializes the past,** it marks THE event which opened the way for us into the Family of God. **This Table memorializes a present reality,** that this is now where we belong ... through faith in Jesus Christ we are redeemed members of the family of God and are privileged to sit at the Family Table. **This Table is also a memorial to the future.** It serves as a pledge, a guarantee, a reminder that one day we have a seat at the heavenly banquet table in the eternal Promised Land, together with all the saints, forever and ever.