

A Memory of Crossing Over
Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
³and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

⁴Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;
⁵hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.

⁶Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;

⁷he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.

³³He turns rivers into a desert,
springs of water into thirsty ground,
³⁴a fruitful land into a salty waste,
because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.

³⁵He turns a desert into pools of water,
a parched land into springs of water.

³⁶And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in;
³⁷they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield.

Joshua 3:7-11, 13-17ⁱ

⁷The LORD said to Joshua,

“This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.

⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’”

⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.”

¹⁰Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan.

¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people.

¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

The Sermon

After four centuries of slavery and abuse in Egypt, God called Moses to lead the Israelites—God’s Covenant People—out of bondage, and to the Promised Land.

To get there, they would have to spend an indeterminate amount of time in the Palestinian wilderness, hungry, thirsty, anxious, unsettled, and uncomfortable. It turned out to be forty years.

But before even getting to the wilderness stage on the way to the Promised Land, they still had to get out of Egypt.

This was not a situation of a nation building a wall, with ICE agents patrolling the border, to keep desperate, hungry, terrified people out.

This is the Berlin Wall, when East German snipers with Russian firearms would shoot to kill any desperate person so starved for human freedom that they would have the resolve, or the audacity, or just the despairing sense of nothing left to lose, to shred their own flesh trying to scale the barbed wire that kept a whole city, a whole country, half a continent, chained, oppressed and hopeless for decades.

Or it's the physical and emotional abuse and the economic enslavement that domestic abusers employ to keep victimized spouses or seniors or children entrapped behind deceptively homey front doors.

It's any kind of barrier to leaving an abusive, oppressive situation that you can imagine.

And God led Moses and the people out of Egypt, playing with Pharaoh's mind, confounding Pharaoh's armies.

And as the great mass of the Covenant people made their exodus from Egypt, the mighty, well-funded Military Industrial Complex of the Egyptian army—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots—came into view of where the people were camped out by the sea, and the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians coming after them.

And in terror, they cried out to God, and they said to Moses, "What have you done to us?"

And Moses said, "Don't be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today, because the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. God is going into battle for you."

And God parted the sea; and the Israelites fled on the dry ground that used to be seabed, with the sea parted so that on both sides the water was piled up like solid walls.

And when the pursuers came after them, the miraculous walls of the sea gave way, and the piles of water came flooding back together and swallowed up the whole army, all the military might of Pharaoh.

And the Covenant People, safely on the other side of the water, saw their terrorizing persecutors dead on the seashore. They saw what God had done for them. It wasn't pleasant; it's not a children's story. But it was effective.

On that day, according to Exodus, the people believed in God, and in Moses, God's servant (Exodus 14:1-31).

And every faithful Israelite would have been able to recognize a pattern that day: that God makes amazing things happen, and we remember where we came from and to whom we belong.

That day, they were sure they believed in the God who had delivered them.

And then they spent the next forty years seemingly trying to disprove it.

I have a hard time blaming them—all the discomfort, all the uncertainty; this is not just a philosophical frustration they are enduring.

We may not be ready to excuse, but surely we can understand how easy it would have been for confidence to waver; it would be a miracle if they did *not* regularly slip into anxiety that becomes questioning that becomes doubt that translates into faithlessness toward God, which opens the door for faithlessness to each other.

And now, it's forty years after that seminal event, and God has led Moses, and Moses has led the people, through year after year of wandering, time after time through the cycle of anxiety-questioning-doubt-faithlessness,

followed by another amazing act of God's deliverance, which nourishes and calms the people, centers them again on who they are and what they are about...

until the next time they have a crisis of confidence, and the cycle starts all over again.

Imagine, after forty years of literal wandering in literal wilderness—imagine one year, let alone forty—how easy it would be to stop looking for the hand of God in everything or anything.

Imagine how many years ago it would have become entirely understandable for any of them to have stopped expecting to be amazed, to have only cynicism in the

face of continued promises that everything was going to turn out great, that we were just about to get to where we'd been going all these years.

Imagine the *self*-doubt of people who for forty years had been hearing the same promises over and over, and seeing nothing resolved.

And now, after forty years, Moses is gone, and God has ordained a new leader for the people, Joshua; and they find themselves, at long last, on the verge of entering the Promised Land,

which is when this episode takes place, where God leads Joshua, and Joshua leads the people, saying to them: By what is about to happen here, you are going to know that among us is the living God.

“When the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the LORD, the God of the cosmos, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters flowing from above will be cut off; they will stand in a single heap.”

I am fascinated that, when it did in fact happen just the way Joshua had said it would, and the current of the Jordan river, overflowing its banks as it does at harvest time, immediately stopped and held itself back, piling itself up in the distance so the people could all cross over on what was suddenly dry ground—

I am fascinated that there is not a single word in the Hebrew text that indicates any response from the people at all.

Forty years earlier, when they were being miraculously rescued from the most powerful army they could have imagined, they saw what God did, and in their amazement, they believed.

This time, there is no expression of amazement. If they were mystified or just relieved; whether they were wondrously baffled, or too tired or jaded to have any reaction any more, the text makes no mention.

They simply crossed over—I picture them moving in silence, with all of the many possible meanings of silence—until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

I also imagine that the oldest folks among them may have shared a distant memory of a time when they were not so jaded, not so wizened by the years of disappointment and dreams deferred—

a time when they were still able to feel something like awe at the miracles great and small that God works in every human life *all the time*.

They had been around long enough to share in a now-distant memory of another time when God had miraculously led them to a moment wherein a miracle had provided the means for them to cross over from an old season of their lives to a new season.

And maybe some of those who had seen the 14,600 sunrises of forty complete laps of the earth around the sun reflected on the fact that God makes amazing things happen, and we remember where we came from and to whom we belong.

We as a church have just emerged from a month of remembrance and celebration—so much gratitude for a miraculous past, so much love for absent friends who in their way faithfully embodied the Spirit; so much for which we are thankful, and about which we can and should be thoroughly excited.

And it won't be long now until Thanksgiving, and Christ the King Sunday; and then an Advent, Christmas and Epiphany season will dominate the last month of this remarkable, tumultuous year.

For many of us, at the moment, we're between the lofty peaks of October and December; between seasons of visible, notable amazement at the mighty acts of God.

How are you doing, in this in-between time?

It is my sincere hope that after the triumphant commemorations of October 2017, and before the stimulating whiff of Christmastime is in the air, that even in this in-between time, you will find opportunities for joy and gratitude and awe, where you can feel God's love and care specifically brought for you in the person of Jesus Christ, your trusted friend and transcendent God.

May we be open to spotting the places where God is actively interfering;

May we be able to sense the ways that Christ is running to the rescue, moving into the chaos while we run for cover;

May we recognize the times and places where the Holy Spirit is calming the torturous waters of your life, and disturbing the places where still waters threaten to grow stagnant.

And may we always be open to whatever transformation God has in store for us,

when God makes amazing things happen,
and we remember where we come from
and to whom we belong.

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ⁱ I am convinced that Joshua 3:12 is textually misplaced; it makes no sense in either the story or in Joshua's speech here, but is entirely logical and appropriate when it reappears in Chapter 4.