

“Movin’ On Up”

Joshua 3:7-17

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It happened over thirty-one years ago, but I don’t think Jackie has forgiven me yet. We moved from my seminary pastorate to a new church less than two months before our second child was born. When I told her that I had accepted the call to this new church, she gave me a less than angelic look. “Do you have any idea how difficult this will be with a two year old child and another on the way?” she asked. Of course I didn’t but acted like I did. As usual, Jackie made the transition gracefully, but I never moved again under these conditions.

I wonder how difficult this move into the Promise Land was for the Israelites. Without a doubt, it was a stiff and intimidating challenge. In many ways crossing the Jordan River at flood stage was reminiscent of crossing the Red Sea soon after they left Egypt. Both required divine help in order to achieve. Each time the water was restrained so the Israelites could safely pass on dry land.

Why did they accept this challenge and take this risk? They were following a dream they had held on to since leaving Egypt of having a homeland where they could settle down and raise their families. Fulfilling this dream required crossing the Jordan River when the water was deep and moving swiftly due to the spring rains and the melting snow on Mount Hermon. As risky and dangerous as it was, though, it had to be done.

I am aware of the ethical dilemma this text raises. What right did the Israelites have to take someone else’s homeland and make it their own? I’ve pondered this on several occasions and suspect you have, too. Let’s have this discussion at another time and place, though, and focus our attention this morning upon our text and the crossing of the Jordan.

For you see, it is clear that this historic crossing is what Joshua 3 and 4 are about because it is mentioned twenty-two times. Israel’s future depended upon the decision they would make on that river bank. Forty years of frustration would either continue or end depending upon whether they would seize this opportunity for a new beginning.

Can you identify with the ancient Israelites this morning? Are you also at a crossroads? Are you suspended between frustration and hope? Is it time for a new beginning in your life?

What river do you need to cross today? What dream is beckoning you? What vision for a better life has captured your attention? What painful experience is begging you to move in a new direction?

Why haven’t you already crossed that river? It is scary, isn’t it? It took the Israelites forty years to get their courage. This was not the first time they had been this close to the Promise Land. You recall that as their journey began, Moses sent twelve spies to survey the territory and bring back a report. Two said that they could move ahead with their plans and cross the Jordan but ten disagreed. They felt the challenge was too great. Those ten must have been very persuasive because the Israelites turned away from the Jordan and wandered in the wilderness for forty long years.

Charting a new course is never easy. If you have ever started a new job, changed careers or opened a business, you know it. If you have left home to go to college or the military you do, too. If you have buried a mate or a marriage you understand. If you have changed your lifestyle or priorities you are aware of the challenges. If you have taught a Sunday school class, gone on a mission trip, joined a new church or examined your faith and made some adjustments, you understand how difficult it is. Charting a new course is never easy. It always seems like the water is at flood stage.

Do you remember the song Jimmy Cliff wrote in 1969 titled, “Many Rivers to Cross?” It was released on the 1972 soundtrack album for the film, “The Harder They Come,” in which Cliff starred as an actor. It reinforces how difficult it is to cross some rivers and begin a new life.

Many rivers to cross
But I can't seem to find my way over
Wandering I'm lost
As I travel along the White Cliffs of Dover

Many rivers to cross
And it's only my will that keeps me alive
I've been ripped, washed up for years
And I merely survive because of my pride

So what do you need in order to cross the river between you and your dreams? You certainly need wisdom, patience, courage, confidence, determination and hope. Where do you find these? I think you find them in community through your faith, family and friends. I know I have.

We talk a lot about community at Smoke Rise, don't we? Last week our attention was drawn to Moses' final days before his death. As he stood on Mount Nebo and looked at the land of his dreams, he had to accept the fact that he would not enter the Promise Land with the people he guided for over forty years.

"How do you bury a dream without becoming bitter or paralyzed?" I asked. "You must have help," I said, "and this help comes from your faith, family and friends. When life is bigger than you are, you must rely upon others to help you."

You need all three in order to pursue new dreams, too. The Israelites did. After mourning Moses' death, Joshua told the people it was time to continue their pilgrimage. Moses' journey was over but theirs was not. It was time to chart a new course and pursue the dreams that were pursuing them.

What was the first thing Joshua did to inspire them and give them confidence? He reminded them that they were not alone. "By this you shall know that among you is the living God." Then he instructed the priests to take the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of creation and step into the water. When they did, the waters receded and stood still until all the people passed.

Can you imagine their relief when the water parted? Many times throughout this journey the Israelites questioned whether God was with them. After the sudden death of Moses, they had to be asking that question again.

Did God die with Moses? Should they have buried their faith in his grave? Would God continue to guide them along their journey? Joshua was wise to confront their doubts and reassure them of God's protection as they stood between yesterday and tomorrow.

Who strengthened your faith and reassured you of God's presence when your doubts were raging? Who parted the waters for you and made it possible for you to cross over to the land of tomorrow? Through whom did God work to help you cross into the land of new beginnings?

Who needs your help now to make that journey? Who is wandering in the wilderness or standing on the river's edge casting a wistful gaze into the future? How could God use you to help them make that journey?

Could we help you along your journey this morning? Do you need someone to help you cross the river that separates you from a new and better life? We want to be there for you just as others have been for us. I hope you will let us.