

“Stepping Out in Faith”

(Joshua 3:7 - 17)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we hear about "The Promised Land", and about entering that land across the River Jordan, we often think of it in symbolic terms.

We think of the Promised Land as Heaven don't we? We think of it as the place of the eternal realm of God; the place where the saints dwell forever secure; the place where death is no more!! And often we think of crossing the River Jordan as crossing through the river of death and arriving in the eternal realms of God. And its quite correct to see it that way.

But crossing the River into the Promised Land, at the time of Moses and Joshua, was crossing into a place in which the people looked forward to living in right here and now.

The promised land was a place where the land flowed with milk and honey a place where the people, after generations of slavery, could cry out "Free At Last! Free at Last!" and where a homeless people could joyfully shout "Home at last! Home at last!" The home where God promised he would lead them. The place which God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

It was a rich land! A blessed land! A land so real! And it was so good! A land the people of Israel had longed for, and dreamed about, for years.

And God promises to us, as he promised to Israel, just such a place. Just such a way of life, the New Life, the abundant life Jesus came to bring us.

And as he did with Israel, God guides us through the wilderness towards it. He leads us to the very edge of the place and shows us the way to enter into it. It's a way that calls for faith in the word of God, a faith that motivates us to trust completely in the Lord.

Today, in our First Reading Israel is finally called to cross into the promised land, and we see them cross through the Jordan into the land of promise.

The details of the story are instructive for our own entering into the New Life God has promised to us in Christ Jesus.

First we must understand about the River Jordan - It is the largest river in the region -- no bridges across it -- the highway from Egypt to the Euphrates - to the land of Assyria and of Babylon never crossed the river - but ran alongside it. It is normally a murky river - slow moving and muddy - even so it can be easily crossed at certain places - that is if you don't mind stepping into a river whose bottom you can't easily see, and if you don't mind getting the feet wet and perhaps much more.

But in the season of flooding - you not only can't see the bottom - you not only can't see where you are going - but you can't be sure the safe way, the known crossing places, would be safe.

Sometimes, the symbol of the river means a roadblock. As it most surely meant to the people of Israel on the day appointed for them to cross the Jordan. It is one thing to put your feet in a gentle stream and another to step into roaring flood waters, which is what the Jordan was like the day they crossed it.

Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. ^[15]

There, by the side of the river, Joshua is told by God that God will be exalted among the people, and then Joshua tells the people that by what is about to happen they should KNOW that they will be able to take possession of the promised land, and this despite all the powers that might prevent them.

Joshua then tells the people that they are to enter the promised land by following the priests, who carry the ark of the Covenant - the sign and symbol of God's presence with them, into the river and that the river will part for them to make their passage through it possible.

I think it is very significant that one has to step into the waters before they are parted, rather than waiting for them to first be parted. Very significant indeed. That's what faith, trust, in God is, as Hebrews 11:1 says:

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

It is only when the soles of the feet of those bearing the ark touch the water that the waters part. Not before!

In Joshua 3:15-17 we hear what happened:

"As soon as the feet of the priests touched the water, the river stopped flowing, and the water started piling up at the town of Adam near Zarethan. No water flowed toward the Dead Sea, and the priests stood in the middle of the dry riverbed near Jericho while everyone else crossed over."

In the faith journey, as individual Christians or as a community, there come times when it looks like you are backed up against a barrier; times that it looks like you are prevented from going forward because of a flooded river.

As followers of Christ, we are called to step out in faith. We are called to cross the river, to enter the turbulent and muddy flood waters so that we may receive the fullness of what God has promised to us.

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH can be a frightening thing to do! We don't know what will happen. But we do know that we have God with us! And we know that he comes to us in Word and Sacrament, to encourage and assure us that he goes before us into the flood waters of life!

God stands in the middle of the troubled waters, divides them, and then watches us pass safely to the other side, whispering to us as we go:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.” [Isaiah 43:1b-3a]. Amen.

The peace and love of God which passes all human understanding, keep our heart and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon by Pastor John Simboras 1 November 2020