

## **RIVER OF PROMISE**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, January 29, 2017***

***based on Joshua 3:14–17, 4:1–7***

This sermon this morning is the final message in a three-part series entitled, “River of Life—opening ourselves to the healing streams of God’s grace.” We have considered over the past two weeks how, in the Bible, a river is a prominent symbol that speaks on several levels. A river is a symbol of life—how God can satisfy the thirsting of our soul and bring new life out of dry ground. There are a great many passages in Scripture which speak in this way of God’s “life-giving waters.” A river is also a symbol of healing—how God can cleanse and renew—and we noted a number of stories in the Bible where a river is a place of both physical and spiritual healing.

A river also functions in the Bible as a boundary image. This is how it functions in the Scripture story we heard this morning, where the people of Israel, journeying out of the Exodus from Egypt to enter finally into the Promised Land, come up against the River Jordan. The river in this case is something that bars their way and that must be crossed over, and so it represents those various points in life when we are struggling to transition out of one circumstance into another.

What do you do when the way into a positive future appears to be blocked? How do you cross over out of difficulty into promise, out of despair into hope, out of death into life? We find answers in the Scripture this morning. Let us pray . . .

The people of Israel, after a very long journey through the wilderness, arrived at the edge of the Promised Land, but their way was blocked by Jordan River. Last Sunday we talked about the Jordan River and observed that it is actually a modest size river—about the size of the Cuyahoga—and thus we might wonder whether it was really such a formidable obstacle. But the people arrived at the Jordan in springtime, when the river is swollen from spring rains and snowmelt from Mt. Hermon (where the Jordan has its headwaters); and thus the waters were flowing fast and high—indeed our passage referred to the fact that “the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of the (spring) harvest.” (Joshua 3:15) Moreover, the people arrived near the end point of the Jordan, near the city of Jericho, where the river flows into the Dead Sea, which is where the river is at its widest. Thus the river Jordan at this juncture presented to the people an impassable barrier.

The leader of the people was Joshua, who had recently succeeded Moses after his death. Under God’s inspiration, he gave some very interesting instructions. He told the priests to carry the ark of the covenant down to the river. The ark of the covenant was the portable chest, topped with cherubim figures, which held the tablets of the ten commandments, and which was the central symbol of the presence of God. When moved,

the ark was covered with a blue cloth and carried by the priests on poles. The priests carried the ark down to the water.

This must have appeared to be a rather questionable undertaking. The priests were walking straight toward what was, at that point, a deep and wide river. Just where did they think they were going? They weren't going to swim with that thing. What we have here is a picture of faith! The priests walked toward the river, having no idea how this was going to work out, but trusting that somehow God would be at work.

Then they started to walk into the river. Our passage describes their "feet dipping into the water." [*the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped into the edge of the water . . . Joshua 3:15*] Here was serious faith. You could say that faith means trusting that God will open the way into a positive future. But the faith that we see in this Scripture story is something even more. It involves moving into that future even before the way is actually opened! We can see here how faith is not a passive thing—it is not a matter of sitting back and just waiting for God to do something. Faith means stepping forward—with the confidence that God will be at work around us and through us.

In such faith, the priests began to wade into the water; as they did so, suddenly, we are told, the flow of the water stopped. The passage goes on to say that the waters "piled up in a heap at Adam," a point about 20 miles to the north. [*the waters flowing from above stood still, piling up in a single heap far off at Adam . . . Joshua 3:16*]

People have long discussed, speculated, and argued about this aspect of the story, and of course there are those who have doubted that any such thing could ever have taken place. But actually, within the last century, such a thing did take place. In 1927, there was a landslide in the general vicinity of the place described in our passage; the 1927 landslide was of such magnitude that the flow of the Jordan was effectively stopped for about twenty hours. So obviously, if God wanted to stop the flow of the Jordan, there were ways to do it. Whatever happened, this was a miraculous working of God; and for the Israelites, the key thing was that the barrier was removed—a pathway opened up across the riverbed, allowing the people to cross over. [*All Israel crossed over on dry ground . . . Joshua 3:17*]

It is a powerful image of the truth that God can open the way through any barrier. In fact we see God doing this sort of thing on multiple occasions. A generation before, as the people of Israel were fleeing from the Pharaoh, and their way was blocked by the waters of the sea, God opened the way. But the greatest act of God opening the way would occur generations later in Jesus Christ. Indeed the story of the ark at the river Jordan prefigures central features of how God would act in Christ. Just as the ark signified God dwelling among the people, so all the more in Christ God would dwell among us. Just as the priests with the ark entered into the raging waters of the river, so Christ—described in the New Testament as our high priest—would enter into the raging waters of our human sin and brokenness, and finally into the waters of death. And just as a way finally

was opened across the river into the Promised Land, so Christ would open the way for us through sin and death into healing, mercy, and life.

So what do you do today when you confront an apparently insurmountable barrier? The Scripture encourages us to move forward in faith, trusting that God will open the way. But this, of course, is not always easy; because if you are standing at the edge of a raging river, confronting some serious obstacle in life, it can be difficult to believe that there is truly a way forward. It is at this juncture that another feature of our story is highly significant.

Our story recounts that as soon as the people crossed over the river Jordan on dry ground, they took one last decisive action before the waters of the Jordan came rushing back. Under Joshua's instruction, they took twelve stones, representing each of the twelve tribes of Israel, out of the riverbed and set them up as a monument by the riverside. *[Joshua said to them, "Each of you take up a stone out of the middle of the Jordan, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you." Joshua 4:5-6]* Why?—so that future generations would remember what God had done there.

Joshua and the people knew that future generations would encounter other serious challenges in other places. If those generations were going to have faith, they needed to know what God could do. So there would be power in the holy memory of what God had done at the Jordan. Such holy memory is what we need today, and it is why we lift up the stories of the Bible every Sunday—so that by knowing what God has done in the past, we can have faith in what God can and will do today.

The people with Joshua also knew that there is power in having a physical sign of God's deliverance. For generations in early Israel, those standing stones by the Jordan functioned as that sort of sign; people could look at those stones and recall God's deeds. Today we have an even greater sign of God's deliverance—in the cross. Whenever we look at the cross, we remember how God through Christ has opened the way for us. Along that line, I will be starting a new sermon series next Sunday focused on the cross and its message to us.

But we are not only encouraged to personally remember God's saving acts; we are also called in the Scripture to be a part of telling the story to others. Joshua went on to say to the people, "When your children ask in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' you shall tell them . . . [the story]." *[Joshua 4:6-7]* Here is a central aspect of our calling as a church—we tell the story of God's actions to today's world and to each new generation. You know, those stones set up by the river were probably quite impressive, but if they had just sat there, they would have been silent and soon meaningless; it took people to keep telling the story. Today there are church buildings here and there in America that are impressive, but silent, because nothing is happening there anymore. The stones can't speak by themselves; it takes people to tell the story, and that is why we make a commitment to be a part of the ministry of the church today. We will have a particular

opportunity to do that this morning, as we will each be invited to fill out a spiritual gifts inventory, identifying those areas where we might be a part of the ministry of today's church.

But as we act, it is crucial to keep in mind that our actions will only be truly effective when we are empowered by the Spirit of God. As those priests headed down with the ark into that river, they could have had all the courage and bravado in the world, but if God had not acted at the right time, this would not have ended well. The priests needed the power of God to be with them; and indeed it was precisely in the power of God that they were trusting—which is what they were signifying by carrying the ark. The ark was the prime symbol of the presence of God; and so as they carried the ark into the river it was powerful declaration that they were not doing this on their own; they were stepping forth in connection with God.

In the end, God acted for their deliverance. The story goes on with some other details through chapter four, and then concludes with these words from Joshua: “The Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over . . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.” [Joshua 4:23-24] The power of God had opened the way, and the people headed into the Promised Land.

So the story encourages us that no matter what sort of barrier we may face, and no matter how threatening the waters may appear—waters of trouble, waters of brokenness, or even the waters of death—we can put our faith in the Lord, knowing that “the hand of the Lord is mighty”; and we can moved forward then in confidence and real hope, trusting that God will bring us through.