



University Christian Church

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REMEMBER YOUR CROSSING OVER

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Joshua 3:7-17

It was not Joshua's first crossing through the water. But with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, everyone else passing through the waters of the Jordan had only heard about the Red Sea parting and the Hebrew's crossing over the beginning of their 40 years in the wilderness. All others coming out of Egypt had died in the wilderness.

What Joshua and Caleb must have been remembering as they walked across that dry riverbed! It was a moment of redemption, a moment of exaltation, a moment of fulfillment. They were coming full circle. The long journey to the Promised Land had started with a parting of the waters and would be bookended with another. The only way to the promised land is through the river.

For us, living in Texas, we understand particularly well the challenges posed to immigrants from Mexico and Central America who "cross over" the Rio Grande to make it into the United States. Next year a new movie now in production will come out entitled, "Crossing Over"ⁱ that will star Harrison Ford, Sean Penn and Ashley Judd, a movie that will explore a full canvas of characters who struggle, first to enter the U.S. and then struggle on and on to obtain legal status in Los Angeles.

For millennia, immigration has been a series of trials to test to the mettle of a people. Few stories, however, can match the drama of our

forbearers in faith, the Hebrews, who after 40 years in the wilderness, now ready themselves to invade the land of Canaan from the east side of the Jordan river near Jericho.

As our passage this morning begins, right in front of them is the Jordan River, a glorified stream of muddy water most of the year, but which, as luck would have it, is in the flood season and flowing with more water than at any time of the year...and, of course, not a single boat in sight. Yes, for the Hebrews it was a time of anticipation, but also a time of fear. IT WAS TIME TO CROSS OVER.

The Hebrew word “abar” implies crossing over a boundary, whether physical like a river, political like a nation's border, or moral, as to enter a covenant or transgress a commandment. The word “abar” is used 21 times in this story of their crossing over.ⁱⁱ

As the priest carrying the Ark of the Covenant stepped foot into the river swollen by the spring rains, God acted to stop the flood. I think it is very significant that one has to step into the roaring waters before they are parted, rather than waiting for them to first be parted. It was when the soles of the feet of those bearing the ark touch the water that the waters part. Not before.

In our faith journeys, there comes times when it looks like we are backed up against a barrier, a river at flood stage. The promised land is on the other side of the raging river. And you can't just wait for the water to part, you have to step into it... step in FIRST!

As the story unfolds, the water backed up all the way to Adam, some eighteen miles north of Jericho. The priests stood, holding the ark at the riverbed's midpoint while the children of Israel passed over into the land of promise. And, when all had passed over, and the last priest carrying the ark

stepped out of the riverbed and onto dry land, the river was released again and flowed on to the Dead Sea. It was the Red Sea parting before Moses and the Hebrews, déjà vu, all over again.

But just as the promise of that first Red Sea crossing was followed by obstacles, crises, and moments of failure, stepping into the Promised Land would be followed by obstacles, as well. Though standing in the Promised Land, it had to be taken from its current inhabitants. This, by the way, is the origin of the current day's Palestinian/Israeli struggle. The Hebrews believed God gave them the land. But the Palestinians living there didn't say, "OK, well, come on in then, take our lands, and kill our people." No. They resisted.

There were formidable powers, seven pagan peoples (the test of every Bible student's reading skills), and some thirty-one powerful kings would need to be conquered. The euphoria of the crossing over was tempered by the challenges of what lay before them.

This is not just some remote historical account. This is a commonly repeating spiritual progression. You and I have to have those "abar" times, those crossover experiences, if we are to grow in faith. The crossover experiences can be and usually are frightening. There are moments when we stand shuddering at the edge of the Jordan, knowing that before us are rushing waters, the fortress city of Jericho, chariots of iron and even rumors of giants in the land, and yet that is clearly the path forward.

There is a lesson here for us: each Red Sea, each Jordan River, you and I face in our lives, each moment when God acts to deliver us, leading us closer to the promise of the gospel, is followed by a new set of obstacles and challenges which must be faced, armed only with trust in the power of God and a determination to persevere.

We see the pattern in the observable stages of our lives. As each new chapter of our lives opens up, these new obstacles will appear:

>At high school graduation... even as adulthood beckons, decisions about a job or vocational training, or college... suddenly loom large...., or when

>That special loved one you find, that you cannot live without... as you move into a more committed relationship... all sorts of new challenges and difficulties arise!, or when

- the new child your wanted so, now brings with her new financial responsibilities and a reordering of your life's priorities... or when,
- that new job you've been given, even with its raise in pay, brings incredible, new stresses and anxiety with it.

Each new stage brings its challenges.

For each of us our spiritual development has that very same character. Think of your own spiritual development. You can see the stages, the changes, and the challenges that you've overcome with God's help as you progress spiritually.

When you get home, pick up your Bible in a quiet moment and continue the story from where Chapter 3 of the Book of Joshua ends. Read chapter 4, especially focusing on Joshua's actions.

A purely practical leader might have had his scouts race ahead to do some more reconnoitering the inhabitants of Jericho whom these Hebrews would soon be facing in battle. A singularly focused leader might have turned his attention to setting up camp for his thousands of itinerants... feeding and providing shelter for them.

But Joshua does neither. Chapter 4 tells us that, while the priests stand in the middle of river that is parted upstream and downstream, Joshua orders one member of each of the 12 tribes of the Hebrews to move one large stone from the newly achieved shore, to carry it back into the river bed and place the stone underneath the feet of the priests who were holding there the ark of the covenant, the symbolic presence of God. Joshua says these stones are to remain in the river bed forever as a silent, invisible, but ever present witness to what God did that day there for the Hebrew people.

Joshua also orders that one representative of each of the 12 tribes to move, probably by rolling, one of the large stones from the river bed and cross it over, “abar” it, to their new home’s shore, the west bank of the Jordan River. The stones were moved to the place where they would camp that evening, not far at, all, a location that was right near Jericho, a location that came to be known as Gilgal. The name Gilgal comes from a Hebrew word which means “a wheel,” which in turns comes from a word, ga,,lal, which means “to roll some object to.” So Gilgal comes to mean “a circle of stones.” Every time the people of Israel would return to Gilgal they would see the circle of stones and remember what God had done to bring them into the Promised Land. The very site of the stones was to be an encouragement, and also a reminder of the power of God to do the amazing, the astounding.

And Joshua told the people that in years to come when their children asked about the strange circle of stones there in Gilgal, that it would be their responsibility, and their great joy, to recount the wondrous works of God and the story of God’s blessing.

In our personal spiritual development, too, it is nearly all about recognizing God's powerful working... nearly, I say. But not entirely. Born of 40 years of trusting God and discovering God so active in his life, Joshua showed the action that we need take when God has so blessed us. **We need to mark the place, and we need to mark the time as sacred.**

This is even more true for you and for me than it was for those tight-knit Hebrews.

- >Maybe it is the scientific and often materialistic age in which we live.
- >Maybe it is the prideful character of a nation and a culture that seem to have subdued every non-human power we have faced.

However you want to describe the reasons for our sense of distance from the Divine, our sense of being removed from the sphere of God's influence, it is, I think, perfectly clear that for people of our age, and perhaps even for us, God often seems disconnected from daily living.

But when we can recognize some special moments...

some special settings...

some special effect of a work of art or piece of music,

some scene in the natural world,

some incredibly blessing relationship...

whatever way it is that God breaks through to us... and we sense the IMMEDIACY OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD... those rare moments MUST BE HONORED... THEY MUST BE TREASURED.

Let me tell you a secret. It is only as recognize the hand of God and the presence of God, that the land we inhabit BECOMES Promised, blessed, flowing with milk and honey.

When you celebrate a birthday, you honor a miracle.

When your Thanksgiving Day celebration becomes more than a feast of food and a Cowboys football game, and you sense deep within, the whole litany of goodness that God pours over you.....in that moment... those precious moments... you honor a miracle.

Yes, there are spiritual disciplines that can heighten this attention:
 prayer meditation
 spiritual journaling,
 worship

And I recommend them all to you. But the central point is this: as God has blessed you, you simply must find a style of living that thankfully remembers your crossings over. You must make your own circles of stones on the new land's riverbank... and tell your children... and your neighbors... and anyone else who will listen how it is that God blesses and enriches you! Friends, this is not even for evangelistic purposes... but for your own spiritual survival... your own spiritual growth.

Count your blessings, yes, but also, tell your blessings....

Tell your blessings... to those who will listen the special moments that God has turned your life right-side up. And as you do, you will see more and more of those blessings flowing your way.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And what Good News, indeed, it is!

ⁱ "Crossing Over is a multi-character canvas about immigrants of different nationalities struggling to achieve legal status in Los Angeles. The film deals with the border, document fraud, the asylum and green card process, work-site enforcement, naturalization, the office of counter terrorism and the clash of cultures. *Written by Wayne Kramer* from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0924129/plotsummary>.

ⁱⁱ between Joshua 3:1 and 5:1