

Hespeler, 1 November, 2020 © Scott McAndless – Communion
Joshua 3:7-17, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-30, 33-37, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13,
Matthew 23:1-12

For forty years, we are told, the children of Israel wandered around in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. That extraordinary period of time began with a famous water crossing – the dramatic battle of the Sea of Reeds. That crossing gets all the attention, the five star ratings and the multimillion dollar blockbusters made about it. Everyone loves that story. That may be why it is so easy for people to forget that there is another water crossing story at the end of those forty years that, in its own way, is just as remarkable: the crossing of the River Jordan.

And the mere fact that these two stories bookend the entire desert wandering saga invites us to compare and contrast them. They have much in common. Both stories are about the legitimization of leadership. The Reed Sea cements Moses’ reputation as perhaps the greatest leader of the people of Israel while the Jordan River crossing marks Joshua as his legitimate successor.

Both stories also happen to be about working through the deep-seated psychological fears of the people. The ancient people of Israel, you see, were terrified of the water. They didn’t swim. They thought that people who went out in ships were just plain crazy, as we see in the psalm that we read this morning. In their minds, the water was this place of terrifying mythological creatures like Rahab and Leviathan and they spoke of the deep as a place of terror. That’s why both of these stories, the Jordan River crossing and the Reed Sea crossing, became for them stories about how their God fought the creatures of their greatest nightmares for them.

So there are important connections between the two stories, but there is one key difference that attracts my attention today. It is just a small thing, but it marks a huge shift for the people. There are some variations in the accounts of the Reed Sea incident, but there is one thing that is quite clear in all of them. At the Sea of Reeds, the people merely had to stand and wait while God prepared the way for them. The water was removed for them and then they passed all the way through on dry ground. But the story is decidedly different when it comes time to cross the Jordan River.

In fact, this is such an important point that it is repeated twice. First, when God is giving the instructions, he says, **“When 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**



Getting our feet wet

Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off.”

And that is repeated again when it actually happens. **“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, the waters flowing from above stood still.”** So we are told twice that the people, and specifically the religious leaders of the people, had to step in and get their feet wet first before the way was cleared. I have learned to pay close attention when the Bible repeats things. There is usually something behind that.

And I know that that doesn't really sound like much to us. I mean, what is the big deal if they had to get their feet wet before God dried up the river? But remember what I said about these people being aquaphobic. They lived with an irrational fear of large bodies of water. So maybe it wouldn't be a big deal for you or me to get our feet wet, but it was for them. And someone may also note that, really, the Jordan River isn't that big and imposing – that it is really not all that scary to cross. And, no, it isn't really, but the story does make a point of telling us that the river was in flood that season and a flood – the idea that a river might overflow its set boundaries, the idea of water out of control – seems to have been something that they found particularly terrifying. So, yes, the crossing and the getting feet wet really was a big deal for them.

Think about this: in order for God to do this particular thing for them, apparently, they first had to confront their biggest, most elemental fear and *then* God would defeat that very thing that they were afraid of. And that is the one element that seems to have been lacking in the story of the Reed Sea.

How should we think about that? Why have these two stories been presented to us in this way so that we can't help but notice this difference? You might think of this as just a little side note in the story of this ancient journey to the Promised Land, but I think there is something of greater symbolic importance going on here.

Perhaps we should think of the two stories as illustrations of how God prepared the people for two different but important phases in their lives as a nation. Maybe as the people entered into the time of wandering in the desert, they needed to learn something about God's power and provision – that is the lesson that we certainly see them struggling through those wilderness years – and so maybe the Reed Sea crossing needed to be such a powerful demonstration of God's raw power. But, honestly, I think that God only rarely works that way. And I think that the Jordan River crossing, which prepared the people for a new, more stable and settled time in their lives, may better represent how God often likes to work in our lives.

The lesson of the Jordan River seems to be simple enough. God can and will do amazing things *for* us. But God is also looking for something *from* us. God is looking for us to get our feet wet. This is not because God needs

our help to get things done. Surely God is quite capable of blasting away any river that might be blocking our path. God laid the course of that river in the first place, surely God is still it's master. But still God wants the people to do this one thing, to get their feet wet. If this is not for God's sake, it must be for theirs.

They were about to enter into the Promised Land. And if they were going to keep that land and make it everything that God was calling for it to be, they needed to be all in. And so God was looking for something from them that indicated that they were committed and that they were going to put their trust in God as they lived in that land. And that seems to be what it meant to be willing to get their feet wet, it meant a willingness to face one of their most elemental fears – the monsters of the flood – with trust that God would make their way.

But, like I say, I don't think that this is just a one-time thing. I think that this is exactly how God often likes to work in our lives. Yes, we look to God to remove the barriers that are lying before us. And God does remove those barriers, God delights in making the way for us. But God does also look for us to get our feet wet as an expression of our faith in God.

So, let's think about this today not merely in terms of the actual geographical barrier that was the Jordan River. I would invite you to look at this story in terms of whatever barrier you may be facing in your own personal life, in the life of some group you belong to or in the life of somebody that you care about.

Say, for example, that you have a particular dream of something that you have felt called to do. You have wanted to do this thing, you have believed that a great deal of good will come from doing it, but there's just been this one thing that's always been in the way of doing it. And I don't know what that barrier is. It could have something to do with money or maybe with somebody's disapproval. It might be a practical barrier or maybe a mental block. But whatever it is, it is real and it is in the way. Whatever that barrier is, is between you and God, but you know that that barrier is there.

Well, I'm here to tell you today that God will remove that barrier. God specializes in removing barriers. But there is one thing, God would like you to get your feet wet. God would like you to take a step out in faith because taking that step is a way for you to express the faith that you have in God, the great barrier remover.

And I'm going to warn you, taking that step of faith might mean what it meant for the children of Israel. It might mean facing up to one of those deep elemental fears that you carry around inside you. Because here is the big secret: the barriers that we encounter in our lives, the barriers that most often prevent us from doing what we're called to do, are usually strongly connected to our most secret and hidden fears.

In fact, I would challenge you to invite God to show you what it is that you really fear. Are you afraid of failure? Of other people judging you? Are you afraid of success, or change or rejection?

Take some time and examine those situations that you've lived through in your life – situations that you worked hardest to escape or avoid. Why did you do that; what were you afraid of? If you are like me, if you are like most people, you will discover a pattern and that pattern will likely point you towards your deepest fear. And I will guarantee you that, whatever barrier you are facing in your life right now, it is connected to that fear. God wants you to get your feet wet in that fear.

I want to say one thing to reassure you: God is not asking you to plunge in with both feet and start swimming. God is not seeking to overwhelm you with that thing that you most fear. God is ready to remove the Jordan River for you. He is only looking for you to get your feet wet. That is to say that he's looking for some sign that you are willing to trust your God with the small things so that God can meet you in the big things.

God just loves small acts of faith. I think that if you just put yourself in a position where you step out into that place that just feels a little bit beyond your comfort zone, you will find that God will meet you with such incredible power that it will blast those barriers away for you. A small step of faith, getting your feet wet, will go a very long way.

So that is one way you can take this story to heart – as you face your own personal challenge. But of course, the story we read this morning was not about an *individual* crossing, but a *community* crossing. So I should also point out that you need to be open to applying this passage to the communities or groups that you belong to. Communities also have their times when they face their River Jordans – when there is a barrier that is preventing them from advancing to the next phase in their lives. It is true, for example, of churches and congregations. The good news is indeed that we have a God who specializes in removing those barriers. And, yes, in that process, God may ask us to get our feet wet and that will indeed often involve confronting what we, as a community, fear most.

It makes me wonder how, exactly, God may be asking the church to get its feet wet these days. I'll bet it might include confronting our own reluctance to actually talk openly and honestly about deep matters of faith. It might also have something to do with our fear of change. Whatever it is, though, it is for our own blessing and benefit that God is asking us to get our feet wet because God is ready to blast some barriers away.