

Sunday – October 13, 2011
Pastor – Bob Dixon
Sermon – **Get Over That Jordon**

St. Matthias UMC
Fredericksburg, Va 22405
www.stmatthiasumc.org

Scripture: **Joshua Chapter 3**

This morning we are going to take a step back to one of the most remembered scenes of the Old Testament, a passage from the book of Joshua, Chapter 3, which tells the story of the crossing of the Israelites from their 40 years of exile in the Wilderness over the River Jordan and back into the Promised Land.

For those who are struggling to remember the story let me provide a quick refresher on the context. Moses led the Israelites out of captivity. If you remember the story from Exodus or the famous scene from the movie the 10 Commandments, Moses stretches out his arms, the sea parts and the Israelites cross over dry land and witness Pharaoh's army swallowed up when God releases the waters again. They spent the next 40 years wandering the Wilderness, living in tents, living off the land. In general it is believed their route took them a little over 200 miles down the present day Sinai Peninsula and to the east beyond the Jordan and Dead Sea. Now keep in mind that The Wilderness wasn't like some lush National Park Forest, abounding with deer and berries. It was hot, dry, rocky and unforgiving. If you will remember that in spite of the fact that God gave the Israelites manna and quail they still rebelled and became ungrateful. At one point things were so bad that some wanted to return to Pharaoh and Moses questioned why God had looked so unfavorably on him for his obedience as he struggled to lead the masses. They were a people who wandered both physically and spiritually. God told Moses that he would see the Promised Land from afar but would not set foot in it. Fast forward some 40 years. Moses gives his final words to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy; he dies at the age 120 on Mount Pisgah near Jericho, and anoints Joshua as the next leader for the Israelites.

Now Joshua is one of the well-known figures of the Bible. Who hasn't sung the tune about Joshua and the Battle of Jericho and the walls that came tumbling down? He was a great leader and was up to the task. God tells Joshua that he will bear the responsibility to lead Israel into the Promised Land, west of the Jordan with borders beyond site and the

restoration of the people as a Nation and fulfillment of God's covenant since the time of Abraham.

Now Joshua did not expect this to be a cake-walk. For one the Jordan was a significant obstacle for the trip. At the time of the crossing it would have been the flood time because the river rose annually to water the crops. A generation had passed since Moses parted the Sea and while the present generation would have known of the story of God's intervention with the waters for Moses, they would not have experienced such a miracle themselves. It would have taken much faith in Joshua for them to follow his command to even attempt to cross the river.

God hadn't appeared to the common people. There was no burning bush or pillar of fire for the everyday people that Moses had experienced. In fact what the people knew of God was based on what they were told by the priests, prophets and leaders. At the time God dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the law, and was carried through the Wilderness by the Levitical Priests. The only one's who would have sensed God in a pillar of fire or smoke above the Ark would have been the high priests who tended the vessel in the Tabernacle, which was a tent like structure that was moved with the people.

Some other things had happened while the Israelites were in the Wilderness. The land they used to own was now owned and occupied by others. These other tribes did not worship the God of Israel, had become quite happy to lay claim to the Promised Land and were not planning to depart just because the God of Israel had made a promise to return the land. Joshua knew that he must prepare the Israelites for battle and trust in God's deliverance from their enemies.

Joshua issues a warning order to the people – get ready its time to reclaim the Promised Land. They listened and made preparation. Joshua dispatches some spies to scout ahead. They are befriended and hidden by an unlikely helper, Rahab the prostitute, who gives them cover and helps them avoid capture. A few days later they return to Joshua and give him good news that the occupiers are afraid of their return and fear the Lord God of Israel.

Let's turn now to the story as recorded in the scriptures. I will start with Joshua; Chapter 3 verses 1-6:

Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. At the end of the three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people. When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come any nearer to it. Then Joshua said to the people, sanctify yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you. To the priests Joshua said, Take up the Ark of the Covenant and pass on in front of the people. So they took up the Ark of the Covenant and went in front of the people.

I want you to imagine that a large mass of people is camped out beside the flowing Jordan. The river is wide, and fast. Imagine the sounds of babies crying, donkeys braying, people moving things, cooking fires crackling, an uneasy tension flows through the people knowing that they are on the verge of something of epic proportion. People lamenting over leaving their stuff and worrying about what is to come. People who are tired and afraid they can't make the journey. People teeming with excitement about new opportunities. A sense of change from the old and re-birth into the new. Something that signals the end of their wandering and a transition into something that is wonderful.

The Priests took up the Ark. That was the sign. You can imagine Joshua looking at the vast expanse of water still wondering how this is going to work. A man of faith yes, but no miracle worker on his own accord. Then God speaks to Joshua in verses 7- 9 by saying the following:
The Lord said to Joshua, This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the Ark of the Covenant. When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.

Joshua tells the people in verse 10 what to look for as the sign that God will perform a similar miracle as to that which brought them out of the bondage of Pharaoh.

Joshua said, By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the Ark of the covenant of the lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. When the soles of the feet of the priests rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.

In Verses 14-17 the people start to move:

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. 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, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea were wholly cut off. Then the people cross over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

The Priests with the Ark lead the way. The Priests step into the river and God stems the flow and gives dry ground. The people cross over to the far shore. The Priests stand firm in the river bed until the entire people has made it safely across. Shortly thereafter in the Book of Joshua, the Israelites re-affirm their covenant with God and God begins to deliver the Promised Land.

This is a wonderful story to illustrate where many of us are in our faith journeys, here today in 2011. Like the wandering Israelites, many of us are standing on the banks of our own Jordan, yearning for the Promised Land. Some have been watching for 40 years now wondering when is their day to cross. Some here have a few more years experience of wandering and are thinking they may have missed the signal to cross. Some have only started their wandering and can only make out a faint glimpse or hear the slight rumble of the Jordan.

That Jordan is a formidable obstacle. Just like the seasonal rise and fall of this river, that both nourishes and parches the land, our own personal Jordan rises and floods and parches our life and faith journey. Like Moses we can see the promised land of God's kingdom but aren't quite sure how we are going to get over there. The Jordan is what separates us as individuals, as a people and as a Nation from what the Kingdom of God is now and is to be and what our reality is in our fallen sinful condition.

How do we know its time to cross? Can't we just wait until the end or did we already miss the sign? We know we need to cross the Jordan. God extends his Grace and just like Moses and Joshua God speaks to us to come into the Promised Land. This is what John Wesley the founder of Methodism called prevenient grace – it's that constant invitation. The Ark of the Covenant has long since disappeared. The law it contained and the dwelling of God it provided here on earth was replaced about 2000 years ago by an act of sacrifice on a tree trunk. You see Jesus himself told us that he came not as the replacement of the law but rather as the fulfillment of the law. He summed up all the laws of the prophets and Moses by saying the greatest commandment – to Love God with all our hearts and mind and likewise to love our neighbors as ourselves. We therefore don't need to look for the Ark, held high by those appointed as Priests. We just need to look for that stark symbol of suffering and sacrifice that is represented by the cross. Now in this time, after the resurrection as recorded in the scriptures, we know that the spirit of God does not dwell in a box like the Ark of the Covenant; rather God dwells in the hearts of people. The Triune God is as much with us today as it was when the Israelites stood peering at the river side.

Okay we see the cross everywhere and if that is the sign then who is our Joshua? Many biblical scholars identify Joshua as a premonition of Jesus. Can it be more than coincidence that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus as he was baptized in the same river Jordan? Like Joshua, Jesus is the one with the vision to take the people from their wanderings to the Promised Land. Like Joshua, Jesus was a man, a man who would glorify the majesty of the God of Israel not by his own accord but rather by what God achieved through his words, acts and obedience. Like Joshua, Jesus came with a message for deliverance from the sinful existence of the Wilderness. The scriptures are full of parables, sayings and quotes from the Messiah that describe what we must do to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Like the Israelites, we too are generations removed from being able to first person testify to the exact miracle of Moses raising hands to part the waters or having seen the empty tomb on the third day. We today, like the Israelites standing by the Jordan, must too act on faith, as spoken by the prophets and leaders anointed by God. With faith we must act and take our first step into the Jordan and with faith keep our eyes on the dwelling of God held on high in the sign of the cross.

Like the Israelites standing on the Jordan we must also experience and share that excitement of something big getting ready to happen. We must prepare to move our camp from the misery of the Wilderness to the deliverance of the Kingdom. We must move out in faith, be ready to act on the signal and make a conscious choice to cross over. We must share the good news with our neighbors, friends and family to spread the excitement that the Promised Land is in sight by the sharing of the Gospel in our words and deeds. We must prepare our camps and be ready to move by shedding our baggage, leaving our belongings and preparing to battle the things that separate us from God.

Yes, some of us will turn back to the Wilderness or chose not to leave. Yes, some of us will wander off the path into the direction of the Dead Sea or the overflowing wall of water. Yes, some of us will miss the sign or take our eyes off the cross in our distraction by the world. But be comforted by the fact that Christ still stands in the middle of that River Jordan keeping the waters at bay for you and me. Look for him today and encourage others to do likewise. Don't delay – get on across that river.

In response to the spoken word we will sing Hymn #724 On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand. This hymn was written in 1787 and the music is from an 1835 arrangement that was popular during religious Camp meetings in the eastern United States at the time. Religious Camp meetings sought to bring people from the depravations and sinful behaviors of the society that they lived in to the promise of a new creation in Christ Jesus. Camp Meetings sought both to convert people as well as refresh their longing for God and holiness. The conditions of the 19th century frontier and wilderness in America were no different than the society we live in today. The message remains relevant and I pray the words of this hymn speak to you today too.