

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

by

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(Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts:

Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; and Matthew 23:1-12

Joshua 3:7-17

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. ⁸You 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.’”

⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰Joshua 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: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When 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 Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

¹⁴When 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. ¹⁵Now 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, ¹⁶the 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 crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While 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.

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on

the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

If you watched any of the World Series, you know that Nolan Ryan and the Texas Rangers got to the edge of the Promised Land but were not able to enter in. They got to the World Series but couldn't win this year. Like Moses, they couldn't enter the Promised Land.

But what a great World Series! And I couldn't help but notice that there were lots of ex Astros all over the playoffs this year. The journey for the St. Louis Cardinals did lead them to the Promised Land of a World Series Championship.

Those wonderful images in the Bible make such great analogies for so many aspects of life, including baseball. How many journeys have you been on through the years toward some Promised Land? Sometimes you cross over and sometimes you don't. For the Texas Rangers, the Houston Astros, and really for the St. Louis Cardinals and for all of us, the journey always continues.

In our text, Moses got to the edge of the Promised Land, but it was Joshua who led the people in. What a dramatic and symbolic scripture this is. You can't read the passage from Joshua today without thinking about the big picture. The crossing of the Jordan River into the Land of Promise was a significant day for the ancient Israelites. It had been a long time coming. Since Abraham and Sara just felt a nudge from God to begin a sacred journey to a new place to this crossing of the Jordan River by Joshua had been five to six hundred years.

In between there were many adventures. The Land of Promise had been occupied by Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachael and Joseph for a while. After Joseph, the people of the Hebrews had become slaves in Egypt for nearly 400 years. It was Moses who led them out of bondage across the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

Our readings over the last several weeks now have been about the sacred journey back toward the Promised Land, the land understood to be promised of God to the Hebrew people. You can imagine the emotion as the people finally cross the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. Such a significant event was marked with appropriate ritual. Representatives of the twelve tribes are assembled, and the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant into the water. The Ark was the portable sacred box representing the presence of God with the people all along the sacred journey. In it was perhaps the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Ark of the Covenant represented the presence of the Holy along the journey.

Moses has died so now Joshua is confirmed as the new leader. And just as Moses led the people across the Red Sea, so now Joshua leads them across a water barrier of his own, the Jordan River. I've crossed the Jordan River from the country of Jordan into Israel at about the same place that the ancient crossing occurred. I traveled as they did to the ancient city of Jericho. I remember so well crossing over the bridge on the tour bus that allowed me for the first time to set foot in the land of Israel. And though it has been a long time ago now, I remember reflecting on how it must have felt for Joshua and the others to finally set foot in the Land of Promise after such a long journey.

The stoppage of the flow of the water in the text is to recall the walls of water at the Red Sea at the hand of Moses to allow the people to walk through the waters on dry ground. Once again, the people walk on dry ground through turbulent waters. All of this is symbolic of the presence of God, especially at this point along the journey. So, when we read this passage, we cannot do so without remembering the big picture and the sacred journey that had preceded it.

The priests bearing up the Ark on dry ground is a ritualistic acknowledgment of the significance of the event. We still preserve rituals to recognize significant passages in the life of the faith community: water baptism as initiation into the faith community, the laying on of hands at the time of Confirmation, the personalization of faith, the wedding ritual acknowledging the human covenant of marriage, and the service of death and resurrection at the passageway from mortality to eternity. Some of us have received the ritual of ordination for representative ministry in the church. There are other rituals in our lives both sacred and secular to mark significant passageways.

Indeed, this day in the Protestant Church is remembered as Reformation Sunday, referencing the new reform that Martin Luther and others brought to the Church of Jesus Christ almost five hundred years ago now. The journey to be the church Jesus Christ calls us to be certainly still continues.

The great truths of the Bible are not just about things that happened a long time ago, but about truths of everyday life where you and I live today. What a universal theme it is for all people of all time to be on a journey in which at times there are significant, even sacred, passageways. How many great hymns of the church can you think of that reflect this great theme?

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, and cast a wishful eye
to Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.
Oh, who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the Promised Land.

"On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," UM Hymnal 724, verse 1

Or from another hymn,

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fear subside;
death of death and hell's destruction,
land be safe on Canaan's side.

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," UM Hymnal 127, verse 3

Through the years, people have identified in various ways with this great theme. Early pilgrims to our nation saw it as the Promised Land across the water. Many of those players in this year's World Series came from backgrounds of poverty to what must have seemed like a Promised Land of opportunity. Albert Pujols came from poverty in the Dominican Republic and was raised by his grandmother whose name was America. He migrated to the United States as a young boy and met the love of his life as a teenager, Deidre. Deidre told him that she already had a child and that her child was Down Syndrome. Albert never wavered. He married Deidra and adopted little Isabella. They have decided they will not have any more children and instead will devote all their love to Isabella. In fact, they have started a foundation devoted to helping many Down Syndrome children have the fullest life possible. If you think Albert Pujols is only about baseball, think again. May our land continue to be an oasis of hope for all people.

Where are you on the journey right now?

In some kind of bondage?

In the wilderness?

At some hopeful point as you look to the future, to life on the other side of some barrier?

Most of life is lived somewhere between where you have been and where you hope to be, moving between one of life's circumstances to another set of life's circumstances. In that sense, we are all a people of God on a sacred journey with a purpose. Sometimes the vision of that purpose is more clear than at others, but because we are all created in the image of God and inheritors of a promise, we are all on the journey, and we are not alone.

What does it take to get you from where you are now to the Promise Land where you want to be?

If you ask Moses or Joshua, I suppose they would say it takes perseverance, faith, keeping on keeping on, trusting the future to God when you are not sure what the future holds. It's a long journey.

But if you could ask Jesus, he would say that you can't get there through arrogance or aggressive behavior or by making the journey of someone else harder of more burdensome, or by making significant rituals empty or shallow or hollow. You get there by authenticity and humility.

And since the sacred journey is about all of us together, you can't do anything that makes the journey of someone else more burdensome and expect to get there. Are you doing anything that makes the journey of someone else more burdensome? If you care only about yourself and looking good, Jesus indicates and if you leave all the heavy lifting to others, then you will never make it to the Promised Land that God intends.

Finally, the journey is a shared journey or it is not worth the trip.

Finally, it is the humble who cross the river and not the arrogant.

Finally it is those who share the burdens of others who get there and not those who make the burdens of others more difficult.

You make the journey to the Promised Land no doubt with faith and courage and trust and perseverance, Moses and Joshua would say, and they are right of course.

But Jesus sees it with more depth. You do not make the journey alone. You must go with others. So on the journey, you go with humility, you make the rituals of passageways significant and you never add to the burden of someone else. What rich imagery we have in the scripture.

May you see your own journey accompanied by a holy presence. The journey ever continues for all of us.