

RIVER CROSSINGS

August 8, 2010

Texts – Joshua 1: 1-9

Hebrews 11: 1-2, 8-10

Fabled in song . . . rich in imagination . . . but not, I'm told, all that imposing in real life. Just a stream really. Nowhere near the Winooski or the LaMoille. But one of the most famous rivers in the world. Some of you have seen it with Adrienne in years past. Jordan – “Deep river, gonna cross over into camp ground.” “I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?”

What Joshua saw was trouble. The river meant the beginning of the unknown, and therefore of the frightening. Unfamiliar territory. Challenge to his wit and wisdom. Conflict. Uncertainty. And the temptation was large to stay put, to hunker down in the desert. Make do. Manage as best we can without engaging this scary task and future. Two of the tribes begged him to do just that. Let us stay here. We can manage on this side, even though the land is meager. You go ahead.

It is a point we all come to from time to time, isn't it? That river. The changing times when we are challenged to move on, to cross over.

It starts early. A woman tells of her daughter's first night away from home; just a sleep over at a friend's house. After going to bed, the child started sobbing quietly. “What is it honey?” her friend's mother asked. “Are you homesick?” “No,” the little one responded with perfect logic, “I'm here-sick.”

Then there's college – a tough river for parents and youth. Empty nest. Strangely silent telephones. Abnormally clean bedrooms. It's an uncertain country we cross into. One teenager says her mother used to sit in front of her empty bedroom and cry. I know what that feels like. Studies show our youth are not dealing too well with it either. Some of that binge drinking is

really about deadening the pain. One young man walked away from his college mailbox looking particularly depressed. A friend asked what was the trouble. "I wrote my parents for money to buy a new desk lamp," he answered. "Oh," his friend said, "so what's the problem?" "They sent me a new desk lamp."

Then there's the crossing into marriage and children. Strange and unknown territory, no matter how much pre-marital counseling or how many books you read. The river gets deeper and more challenging. "River Jordan, chilly and wide."

Job changes come to mind, forced by circumstance or by inner discontent. New, unpredictable future. Do we or don't we? It's easier to sit tight, but sometimes you can't. A lot of river crossings can't be avoided. A loved one slips away in the night. Or walks away without warning. Or at sixty-five or seventy they tell you it's over. Or illness or the limitations of age open onto unknown territory. You don't really want to go there, but you must.

I don't want to depress you this morning. But the reality is that from time to time life does run right up to a river crossing, and it pays to be ready. Of course, every day is a river crossing in a certain sense – we move into uncertain territory where all kinds of threats and dangers lurk, where the possibility of setback and failure is ever present. But the biggest problem with river crossings, the Bible says, is what they do to us on the inside – they scare us, and they discourage us.

They scare us because we are unsure whether we can handle the challenges over there. There is no fear quite like the fear that we will be inadequate, that we may fall apart, that we won't be able to handle the stress. And they discourage us because no matter how hard we struggle or how much we give, things do not always get on the way we would like. The grades don't come no matter how hard we study. The job opportunities slip away like an early morning mist. The future begins to close in and leave us nothing to look forward to.

Which is to say (isn't it?) – we don't always get what we want from God and life. Real certainty about our future. Answers to all our questions. Sunny spirit and unwavering faith. That's really what we would like from our religion, isn't it? And some days, thank God, it does give us that. But a lot of the time we stand right where Joshua stood, looking over Jordan and seeing mostly scary stuff, strange enemies lying in wait.

What to do? Joshua was offered two things as he stood at the river crossing that day. They are offered to us as well. The first was the gift of principles. *“This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth,”* we read; *“you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.”* (Joshua 1: 8) He is given, in other words, the gift of principles.

What does that mean to us? Is this a recipe book, full of neat and tidy answers for every challenge we encounter, every quandary we face? No. But there are some fundamental moral principles here. They are our heritage as Christians, but more than that – they are (as the Psalmist says) a *“lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* (Psalm 119: 105)

Some of us enjoy poking fun at the narrowness of our forebears. We see them in those old paintings with starched collars and somber expressions, and blessed by 20 / 20 hindsight we mark their failings and their foibles. We are broadminded by comparison, and so we should be. It would be a terrible mistake not to learn from the experiences and failings of those who have gone before. But note it well – our breadth of mind and spirit must not come at the expense of depth. There are moral principles which our ancestors uncovered over time. It is the height of idiocy to deviate from them on the wave of some current secular foolishness or sophomoric research study.

Howard Arnold Walter (1883-1918) graduated from Princeton University at the turn of the

last century and set off to teach English at Waseta University in Japan. Far away from home and family, his life began to unravel into an undisciplined existence that almost ruined him. But something out of his past got hold of him. He struggled and straightened out his life. One day he penned a poem for himself. He entitled it, “My Creed.” You'll recognize it, I think.

“I would be true, for there are those who trust me. I would be pure,
for there are those who care. I would be strong, there is much to
suffer. I would be brave, for there is much to dare.”

Standing on the riverbank, scared and wondering what lies ahead, we have in our hearts the gift of a few abiding principles. If we remain true as best we can, they will bear us along well. They will wear well through the troubles and terrors of life in an unknown land.

So we get some principles, as Joshua did, but we also get something else – the promise of a presence. The presence of God as strength to handle whatever lies ahead. “*As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you,*” the voice said to Joshua at the river crossing. “*Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*” (Joshua 1: 5, 9) The promise of a presence.

“Is that all?” someone says; “Just a promise?” Well yes, a promise . . . and the devil of it is that the strength and courage it offers only come as we trust the Promise Giver to the point of getting our feet wet and daring to move into the unknown. Much as we might want more, this is what is offered. The promise of a presence.

Studdert Kennedy was a chaplain in the British army during World War I. Knick-named “Woodbine Willie” by the troops, Kennedy was awarded the Military Cross for bravery in helping the wounded. As the war progressed, however, he came to feel that doing his duty demanded more than helping men die in war. It called for him to see that there would be no more wars in which men and women would be called to die.

Like Howard Walter (who was his contemporary), he penned a poem which expresses the convictions he learned in the midst of war and the struggle for peace. He said –

Peace does not mean the end of all our striving,
Joy does not mean the drying of our tears;
Peace is the power that comes to souls arriving
Up to the light where God himself appears.
Joy is the wine that God is ever pouring
Into the hearts of those who dare with him.
Lighting their eyes to vision and adoring
Strengthening their arms to warfare glad or grim.

“I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.” That is the promise. And if we trust it . . . if we move out on the basis of it, trusting that whatever comes we shall be given the strength and courage to handle it . . . we find that, in fact, this is precisely what happens. Perhaps not a minute before needed, but always in time. “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle,” India’s Mother Theresa used to say, and then she would add – “I just wish that He didn’t trust me so much.”

Joshua received two things at the river’s edge – the gift of principles and the promise of a presence. With them he crossed the Jordan, and the twelve tribes followed safely behind.

At what river’s edge do you stand today? For each of us the answer must be different, yet for each it is also the same. For today is the beginning of all our tomorrows, and that territory is unknown and frightening. The temptation always is to want to stay put, to hunker down in the desert and make do. But we can’t. What we can do is this –

- ▶ First, latch onto the promise -- *“I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.”* I, God says, will give you the power to handle whatever comes.

- ▶ Secondly, remain true to your principles – for there are those who trust you . . .
and there are those who care.

This is the testimony not only of Joshua but of millions who have gone before us. It can make all the difference in the world!