

Joshua 3:7-17 The Other Crossing
November 1, 2020

One of the most well-known stories in all the bible is the parting of the Red Sea as Moses led the Israelites away from captivity in Egypt into the wilderness. It has been depicted on the big screen by Cecil B. DeMille with Charlton Heston playing the part of Moses. When I was a child, the movie came on TV most years around Easter time, which was, of course, also the time of Passover for the people of the Jewish faith, which made it a timely presentation.

One year we had guests in from out-of-town, cousins or something, with aunts and uncles. All the children watched the movie while the adults visited in the other room. They said, “tell us when they part the Red Sea.” They didn’t want to miss the cinematic rendering of the great miracle. It was a big deal.

The Crossing of the Jordan

Lesser known is the crossing of the Jordan River when Joshua led them out of the wilderness into the land of promise. It is interesting that the Israelites passed through water both when they left captivity, and when they entered the land of promise. Though never depicted on the big screen, the two stories have a remarkable similarity, the people passed by a wall of water on dry ground, as God gave their leaders, Moses and Joshua, credibility.

There are a couple of things that came to my mind as I read and considered this episode. I grew up around rivers, in the land of Mark Twain, at the confluence of the great North American river systems, the Missouri and the Mississippi, and the Illinois to boot.

By the time I came along, many bridges had been built rendering miraculous river crossings unnecessary. One can cross rivers large and small without much thought, so that a river is not as great a barrier as in previous times. Imagine a time without bridges, how difficult travels would be, every little stream creating an obstacle that could cause delays, and be traversed only with difficulty.

Water

And then I thought about the significance of water, both in these biblical stories and in life. Water is an interesting part of life. Up to 60% of the human body is water; the brain and heart 73%, ligaments 83%, skin 64%, muscle and kidneys 79%, even bones are 31%. Most people spend much of their time mildly dehydrated because the substances we drink have the affect of causing our bodies to expel more fluids than are taken in.

Without water one can only expect to live three or four days. Yet if someone is submerged in a body of water, drowning occurs after only a few minutes. Thus the irony, that human beings need to be protected from *and* saved by water at the same time.

Captivity/Liberation/Promise

But then it occurred to me that this part of the Israel's journey adds significance to our understanding of the spiritual life. This story about the transition from captivity to citizenship in Canaan offers an alternative view to the binary understanding of the spiritual life with which I have come to take for granted. It adds a middle layer.

I was raised on a process of conversion that was characterized by a transition from a life under sin to a life under grace, mediated by a conversion experience accompanied by baptism. In terms of the story, it is as if the transition from captivity to promised land had no intervening experience. There is enough in scripture to accept this view. But it has some difficulties that the story of Israel may help to mitigate. What does one do with post-conversion sin, and with experiences of emptiness and growth? We are offered a middle phase; wilderness.

The wilderness part of the journey is important. It is where failure and stumbling is experienced and trust is learned. It is like a time of training and practice where important growth happens that prepares a person for life in the realm. Sometimes it may help to have this middle image because it makes better sense of our experience.

The meaning of the story is that God is present. As a matter of fact, it is in the wilderness that Israel experiences God's presence through manna and quail,

and water from the rock, and where they received the commandments and began the temple services, which gave God a place among them, preparing them for life under grace. The wilderness is a pretty big deal too.

Be encouraged and strengthened. Be averse to the belief that life's hardships are permanent and thus to be avoided, or even that they are useless. Do not be afraid of the people who seem to be lined up against you, they are fellow travelers, nor any of the uncertainties, for we are in God's care, in which the water quenches our thirst, and cleanses us, but when the time comes to pass through, it is held back so that we are protected from its dangers.

And as we travel through the wilderness on the way to the other crossing, always remember that in the words of Frederick Buechner, "what's lost is nothing set next to what's found," or Paul, "I am convinced that all our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed."

Joshua 7:7-17

7 And the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. 8 Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’”

9 Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God. 10 This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. 11 See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. 12 Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. 13 And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the Lord—the Lord of all the earth—set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.”

14 So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. 15 Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, 16 the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

17 The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and

stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

As I am sure you know the Covid numbers are on the rise again, and have become a concern. New cases, hospitalizations, and cases per 100,000 have seen significant surges in Delaware County in the last several days. As before, in an abundance of caution, the deacons and I have decided to take a two week hiatus from in-person worship, beginning next week. After next week we will re-evaluate according to the direction things go. We will have a video worship as before ready for next Sunday. It is very difficult to know what to do, and we are thankful for everyone’s trust and cooperation. I sincerely hope that the present trends abate, and we can meet again soon.

There will be a drop off day on Saturday November 14 her at the church so those of you who have taken shoe boxes can turn those in, as well as anyone who has PIN donations. There will be another drop off day for those giving gifts to the foster children, if we are unable to begin meeting again by December.

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