

Our text today finds the Hebrews finally at the Jordan River after journeying through the wilderness for forty years. All fall we have been watching the people as they were transformed from frightened runaway slaves to a people who can walk by faith in God.

Two weeks ago, we noticed that it wasn't God's idea for this journey of faith to take so long. Thirty-eight years before the events of our text today, the Lord had brought the people to the southern gate of the Promised Land. But they had grown accustomed to the desert and were afraid of the giants in the land, so they voted not to enter. The terrifying thing is that God honored their choice and let that entire generation continue to wander in the desert until they died off.

When you find that your own life has entered a hard place, you have to remember that God never asks anyone to stay in the desert. You were there for a purpose, which is to discover the transforming faith you will need to enter the next place God has for you. So, the last thing you want to do is get good at coping with the loneliness, the overwhelming grief, or the anger. It was just an in-between place—not your home.

Now Moses has died, and Joshua has been ordained by God to lead the next generation across the Jordan and at last into their new home. If you have been to Israel and seen the Jordan you know it is not much of a river today, but that is because in modern times the water has been siphoned off for agricultural purposes. The text tells us that at this time the river separating the Hebrews from the Land was so high it had overflowed its banks.

As the people stared at the swollen Jordan, they had to wonder if God would do it again. They had heard their parents tell so many stories about that amazing day when they crossed the Red Sea. They knew the details of how God first divided the waters right before their eyes, and seeing the waters parted, they then walked through on dry ground. So, they had to wonder if God would do for them at the Jordan what was done for their parents at the Red Sea?

Then the word came down from Joshua that indeed God was also going to part the waters of the Jordan. The barrier between them and God's promises would be divided. Only this time the instructions were significantly different. Joshua told the people to start walking toward the undivided waters of the Jordan, with the priests at the front of the line.

Can't you just hear the chatter among the people as they walked toward this swollen river? I can tell you what I think they were saying, "Rev. Moses would have never come up with this plan." "I don't know if Joshua is going to work out as a leader." "We've never done it this way before. First God divides the water. Then we walk through."

No, that was then. This is now. Now God expects the Hebrews to have learned something from their long sojourn. God expects them to know how to walk by faith. So, it wasn't until the soles of the feet of the priests touched the river that "the waters flowing down stood up in a single heap."

You don't leave the desert as the same way you entered it. You entered it passively because you were pushed into it without a lot of choices. A loved one died, and you couldn't imagine life without this person. A job was lost, or a dream, or a relationship, and you found yourself in a barren place. A disease was discovered in your body, and you kept wandering through treatments. Like the Hebrews you thought this journey was going to kill you, or at least your spirit. But if along the way you discovered God was traveling with you, you were transformed. You didn't waste the suffering. So, you leave the desert with different priorities, different visions about life, and very different devotions. Now you know that if God is with you, the rivers can never overwhelm

you. Now you walk by taking steps of faith. That's what made the Hebrews overcome their doubts and head toward the unparted waters.

Faith is what keeps us moving when we haven't seen the miracles yet. We haven't been called to live by miracles, but by the faith we have learned along the way. When facing challenges at work, school, home, or as a church, those who have learned faith know better than wait for God to part the waters before they act. And they are willing to take the necessary risks of moving ahead toward their dreams before the miracles show up.

After the priests stepped into the waters, and watched it then divide, they moved to the center of the riverbed while the Hebrews walked by them to the other side of the Jordan. On their shoulders, with poles, they carried the Ark of the Covenant. It had been given to the people by God along their way in the desert. It was an ornate box with cherubs on the top, whose wings curved up to form a chair. In essence, this Ark of the Covenant was the seat of God, or as they called it, "the mercy seat." It always appeared empty to the naked eye, but through the lens of faith the human soul could see that the living God was traveling with the people in the desert. And so it was fitting that this mercy seat of God was now in the midst of the Jordan, holding back the waters so they did not overwhelm the people walking through them.

It is striking that when the Gospel of Mark introduces us to Jesus, we find him being baptized in the same Jordan River. Mark knew this was no ordinary baptism. This was the incarnation of God in our midst. The formerly invisible God on an empty chair has now been made visible in Jesus Christ. Even his name Jesus is the same as the Hebrew name Joshu—the parallels are obvious. The Savior has taken his stand with us in the high waters. And that is all we need to know to keep moving in faith as a church.

The theme of this year's Stewardship Campaign is "Steps of Faith." For three weeks now you have heard presentations from our Stewardship Committee. You should have already received a stewardship brochure in the mail outlining our financial challenges as well as the opportunities before us. Later this week you will receive a pledge card, and next week we will present these pledges to God in our worship service.

Clearly, the church has been through some strange and uncomfortable in-between times recently. None of you asked for that, and yet as is always true with transitions we've been on a road that could cause anxiety. And when people are anxious, they don't tend to be givers. At best they take a wait and see attitude, insisting that God first perform the miracles and then they'll give. But that would mean we hadn't learned faith in God along the way on our own desert sojourn.

God has never left this church. God was with us when you could see that, and when the mercy seat seemed empty. And the love of God in Jesus Christ was always as near as the people around you who are devoted to this congregation.

You will soon be at the Jordan River with the opportunity to enter a wonderful new season in the life of the church. But it will require the faith is to start moving, by funding this ministry's future—before the miracles start to unfold. At this point you don't know who your new pastor will be, if the growth curve will return to the church, or what this ministry will look like in the future. But there is no way to find out other than to make a commitment now to invest in the call to move ahead. Or, as the biblical story, you can turn away from this opportunity and continue to wander in the desert. God will honor your choice, and this Stewardship Campaign is one of the opportunities you have to make it.

What you write on that pledge card is not just a financial commitment to the church. It is a statement of faith. The people didn't start walking toward the unparted waters of the Jordan because they had faith in themselves or even in Joshua, but because they had faith in God.

Your pledge is a decision to step ahead with faith in the God who is with us, in the Savior who is dying to love us and who rose to give us new life, and in the future that is filled with hope. Amen.