

It took forty years, two generations, a change in leadership, and more miracles than we have been able to examine in a ten-week sermon series, but the Hebrews have finally left the desert, crossed the Jordan, and entered the Promised Land.

One of the most important things to remember about the Promised Land is you can never confuse it with Paradise. That was true about the Hebrew's Promised Land, and it's true about the Promised Land to which God has been leading you and our church. According to Genesis, Paradise is what God created for us in the beginning. But it only lasted for two chapters before we demonstrated our nature to reaching for more than God gives us. Then it became Paradise lost. By contrast the Promised Land, as the Hebrews will discover, is a place filled with challenges, battles, giants, and struggles. They struggled with those who didn't want them there, they struggled with each other, with the land that was not always fruitful, and they struggled with God.

The Promised Land is the right place to be, however, because it is where you are called to struggle. So just because life has become difficult that doesn't mean you are outside of the will of God for your life. In fact, if you are pursuing a call from God expect it to be worthy of struggles.

Even the name "Israel" means those who struggle with God. So, what they will be struggling for through all the obstacles that wait ahead is what they were struggling for in desert—finding faith in the faithfulness of God.

Knowing what lies ahead, the first thing God tells the Hebrews to do after the miraculous Jordan River crossing was to build a memorial. As they walked through the dry riverbed, while God held back the waters of the Jordan, Joshua told twelve men, one each from the twelve tribes, to pick up a large stone from the place where the priests stood holding the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. Remember, this Ark was the symbolic "mercy seat" of God who traveled with the people. Now that holy presence was protecting the Hebrews from being overwhelmed by the Jordan as God did at the Red Sea forty years ago. The twelve men carried the stones they collected from the riverbed on their shoulders to the other side of the Jordan.

Then Joshua built the memorial out of those stones and said to the Hebrews: "Let this be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do these stones mean to you?' Then you shall tell them when the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord... So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

So, the purpose of the memorial was to create a tradition or a means for children to grow up knowing they have a story. The child asks, "What do these stones mean?" and their Hebrew parents would tell the story again about the God who brought them through the waters. Similarly, our children ask, "What does this photograph, or this heirloom, this old Christmas ornament mean?" "What does our worship service mean, and why do we come back here every Sunday?" "What do these sacraments mean?" And we tell them the story again.

Giving our children a story may be the most important inheritance we have to offer our children. There are so many struggles waiting up ahead in whatever Promised Land they find. And they aren't going to make it unless they know who they are, and the God who is with them through the waters.

In our house in Pittsburgh, like many families, my wife and I filled the wall of the stairwell with photographs. We used over twenty large, old black and white photos that depict six generations from Dawne's ancestors and six from mine. We called it the Great Cloud of Witnesses wall. If we had the photos of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Mary and the disciples we would have included those because they are also part of our family of faith. We put those old photos on the wall because we wanted these witnesses surrounding our kids when they ran up and down the stairs, which was the only way they took the stairs. We knew better than they

did about the struggles waiting for them when they became adults, and we wanted to root their lives in our deep story of faith while we could.

When they'd let us, we told the kids the stories of everyone on that wall. Some of these were stories of falling in love, coming home from a war, laughing at a wedding, raising a family, or giving the family farm to the generation in the next photo. Other stories were about the Great Depression, someone who didn't come home from a war, or someone who struggled with a crippling disease. There are also stories we're not proud of, but they are part of our family story. Not all the parents were faithful to their families, and not all the kids turned out to make their parents proud. But the best part of the story is that every Sunday, in good times and hard times, these families would return to their humble churches, and they would sing about the Great Faithfulness of God, stand to say the Apostle's Creed, and gather around the communion table to get another taste of grace.

That's a story of sturdy faith. Your family has a very similar story, I am sure. And it is strong enough to carry the next generation when they don't seem to have a lot of faith on their own. If they have a story of faith, they're never on their own. Even if they rebel from the story at least it is worth rebelling against. That is still far better than wandering through life without a story. They may try to just walk away from it, but they cannot get rid of the history once it has been given to them. And it is always waiting for them to return to it.

Part of what story does is nurture wonder and awe. Our kids will receive plenty of explanations and rationality through the educational process, and I am grateful for these wonderful gifts as well. But to survive the struggles waiting ahead for them they need a story that includes the most miraculous things. "Can you believe Grandpa came home with a war bride? That must have been so hard on Grandma." "Can you believe he took a bus to the south to march for civil rights? How did he find the courage?" "Can you believe she raised all their children on her own and sent them to college?" Can you believe God parted the waters again, and again, and the family drama continued?

That's why the memorials are so important—they help us tell our great story. And we have to lean back into that story in order to find the vision to move ahead. This is why our nation is filled with memorials to past struggles and wars. We always wait until the battles are long over before we build the memorial. But here God has instructed the Hebrews to build their memorial before any battles have been fought, and before anything heroic or sacrifice has occurred. So why build a memorial when they have just entered the Promised Land? I think it's because they aren't remembering their own faithfulness. They're remembering the faithfulness of God who delivered them from slavery, carried them through the desert, parted the Red Sea and the Jordan River, and who took a people with no future and gave them one filled with hope. The stories they would tell from these stones would be about a God who remained faithful to the people even when they were not faithful to God.

Like some of the stories that come from the memorials in our family photographs, and some of the stories we know about our own lives, some of the Hebrew stories were also about flawed people. But we don't hide those stories because that is also part of the greater story of redemption. This greater story is about a God who never gives up on us, and who stays with the family of faith continuing to part the waters to give us new opportunity.

Having a story that turns on that kind of holy commitment, frees us to make holy commitments as well. That is what is behind the pledge cards we present today in worship. These cards are pledges about the financial investment we are making in the church's ministry, but they are also statements of commitment to the God who is clearly committed to us. They are expressions of thanksgiving from a people who have been paying attention to the obvious blessings we have received. And they are memorials to our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. Amen.