



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Jesus of the Old Testament

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JUNE 24, 2018

PART THREE

This Series

Two weeks ago we began a summer series of messages looking at the life and times of the great leader Joshua in the Old Testament. We have entitled this study **The Jesus of the Old Testament**, because the name Joshua (pronounced Yeshua by the Jews in the time of the New Testament, and Jesus in our language) literally means “The Lord Saves.” And Joshua was the man used by God to fulfill His promise of deliverance and salvation to His people. Last week, in Joshua chapter 2, we met an unexpected walk-on character in this great drama: Rahab. No one would have ever guessed that she would become a great hero of faith. Today we turn to chapters 3 and 4, where the action returns to General Joshua and his army.

Joshua 3

The Israelites, camped on the east bank of the Jordan River, await orders from the Lord, their Supreme Commander:

Early the next morning Joshua and all the Israelites left Acacia Grove and arrived at the banks of the Jordan River, where they camped before crossing. ²Three days later the Israelite officers went through the camp, ³giving these instructions to the people: “When you see the Levitical priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God, move out from your positions and follow them. ⁴Since you have never traveled this way before, they will guide you. Stay about half a mile behind them, keeping a clear distance between you and the Ark. Make sure you don’t come any closer.”

⁵Then Joshua told the people, “Purify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do great wonders among you.”

⁶In the morning Joshua said to the priests, “Lift up the Ark of the Covenant and lead the people across the river.” And so they started out and went ahead of the people.

⁷The LORD told Joshua, “Today I will begin to make you a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites. They will know that I am with you, just as I was with Moses. ⁸Give this command to the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant: ‘When you reach the banks of the Jordan River, take a few steps into the river and stop there.’”

¹⁴So the people left their camp to cross the Jordan, and the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant went ahead of them. ¹⁵It was the harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. But as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river’s edge, ¹⁶the water above that point began backing up a great distance away at a town called Adam, which is near Zarethan. And the water below that point flowed on to the Dead Sea until the riverbed was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the town of Jericho.

¹⁷Meanwhile, the priests who were carrying the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed as the people passed by. They waited there until the whole nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry ground.

Joshua 3:1-8, 14-17 (NLT)

Crossing the Jordan River

The Jordan River is a snakelike natural barrier, twisting and bending for hundreds of miles from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. Today it separates the nations of Israel and Jordan. The name literally means “Descend,” and it drops 1,000 vertical feet as it travels from north to south. Thus, even in the dry season, it has a strong current (because water always obeys the law of gravity). But during the spring of the year, as the rainy season and the melting snow of northern mountains causes it to swell, a narrow river be-

comes a mile wide with flooded banks and very swift current—dangerous and impassable.

Last September those of us who were in Bonita Springs saw what a flood can do. The waters dumped on us by Hurricane Irma caused many streets, yards and houses to have several feet of water. People had to wade out of the flood zone, or even be rescued by boats. But the flood waters were stationary. The flood of the Jordan River was far more dangerous at this time, because the water was moving rapidly and treacherously. Even if the Israeli army could have constructed some rafts or boats on the east bank of the Jordan, the crossing would have been perilous. If God didn't intervene to work a miracle, there would be no way they could ever conquer the Promised Land.

The unprecedented natural wonder of the stopping of the Jordan River was, of course, a powerful echo of another miracle that happened 40 years earlier, at another seemingly impassable body of water: the Red Sea. At that critical moment the previous leader of Israel, Moses, had stepped into the water with his arms stretched out and the waters had parted. All the people traveled through the middle of the sea on dry ground, and once they had safely crossed the waters came back to drown the pursuing Egyptians. The world had never seen such an amazing sight. But now it happens again—to the next generation of the Hebrews. It was an undeniable confirmation that the same God who had been with Moses to deliver them from Egypt was the same God who would work through Joshua to complete His promise and deliver them into their new homeland.

Let's step back from the details of the biblical account for a moment to notice how this story has impacted believers for over 3,000 years. At some point in nearly everyone's life, he or she will come to a difficult barrier. It will seem as impossible and intimidating to us as the flooded Jordan River was to Joshua. We will not know how to cross it in our own strength. That barrier separates us from our goal, whatever our "Promised Land" might be. Have you ever come to your Jordan? Have you faced a problem seemingly bigger than you? Spiritual poets and authors and songwriters have sometimes used the image of

“crossing the Jordan” as a picture of the ultimate barrier, death—the boundary of the ultimate Promised Land, heaven.

However you imagine the Jordan River, it is a fitting symbol for those great challenges of life. Joshua and his people certainly faced the same temptations we do: to shrink back from challenges, to stay in our comfort zones, to give up our dreams and aspirations. The east bank of the Jordan is pretty bleak and desert-like (nowhere near as fertile and desirable as the Promised Land), yet it must have seemed safe to them. The other side of the river seemed unreachable—and if they did manage to get there, they would have some significant battles to fight. How enticing to give up the dream and settle for stressless comfort and the familiar ... just like the tempting allure people today can face. “It’s too risky to try to cross the river,” the voice of fear whispers within us. “Better just play it safe, and settle for what I have.”

The Ark of the Covenant

To help the people of Israel conquer their fears, God gave them something concrete and visible on which to focus. He directed Joshua to have the Ark of the Covenant carried before them to the banks of the swollen river. The Ark was a wooden box about 4 feet long, 3 feet wide and 3 feet high, covered in gold plate. It had rings attached to the corners, through which rods could be slid so the Ark could be carried on the shoulders of the priests. Inside it were a few powerful artifacts, including the original tablets of the Ten Commandments: the foundation of their society and laws and government. It is fair to compare the Ark to the most revered objects of our nation’s history: the original Declaration of Independence preserved in the National Archives in Washington, and the Liberty Bell preserved in Philadelphia. The ridiculous plot cooked up by screenwriters for the film “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (in which the Ark has some kind of mystical and deadly powers) has nothing to do with the real thing!

And the Ark was not an object of worship (an idol). All the surrounding nations, including the Egyptians from whom they escaped and the Canaanites they were about to conquer, had fallen into the

blunder of worshiping physical objects, idols and poles, or natural objects like the sun and mountains. But the first of the Ten Commandments makes it clear that nothing but the invisible, eternal and all-powerful God Himself is worthy of worship. The Israelites did not bow down to the Ark. They simply understood it as the visible symbol of Someone far greater who is invisible. In this respect we can see the Sacrament of Holy Communion as comparable for the church of Jesus Christ. We do not worship the bread and the cup, but we see them as physical symbols of spiritual reality.

The Ark was carried to the river. The people followed at a respectful distance, waiting to see what God would do. And then, when the priests walked into the river with the Ark, God began to work. The waters coming from the north stopped as if they'd hit a dam. The rest of the water flowed away into the Dead Sea. The riverbed became a highway for them. It's interesting to notice that God required the priests to actually wade into the water, to take a risk, rather than just stand next to the river. Is it not possible that God's call to you and me, as He beckons us to take a risk to enter our Promised Land, requires us to step in and get our feet wet? Rather than just waiting, we may need to take some action. It's far easier to steer the wheels of a car that's in motion than one that is stuck in **PARK**.

The Power of a Memorial

After the safe crossing of the Jordan, we now move on to chapter 4 to see what Joshua did on the other side.

When all the people had crossed the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ²"Now choose twelve men, one from each tribe. ³Tell them, 'Take twelve stones from the very place where the priests are standing in the middle of the Jordan. Carry them out and pile them up at the place where you will camp tonight.'"

"... ⁶We will use these stones to build a memorial. In the future your children will ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷Then you can tell them, 'They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the LORD's Cove-

nant went across.’ These stones will stand as a memorial among the people of Israel forever.”

Joshua 4:1-3, 6-7 (NLT)

The next step for the people was to create a memorial to mark what God had done for them. One representative from each of the twelve tribes was instructed to take a rock from the middle of the river bed and carry it to the west side, where they were piled up together to make a pillar. I think of this monument as being comparable to the military cemeteries in Normandy. A few weeks ago, on the anniversary of D-Day, we saw on newscasts the video record of ceremonies and tributes held at the final resting places of Allied soldiers. What we find in those cemeteries is comparable to the memorial at the Jordan described in Joshua 4: they are both reminders in stone of what happened when courageous ancestors crossed a body of water in the face of an enemy in order to provide the blessing of freedom to the generations that followed.

This incident speaks to us of the human need to celebrate and to remember milestones and important events. On a national level we remember our nation’s birth on July 4; on a spiritual level we remember the coming of Christ at Christmas and His death and resurrection on Good Friday and Easter. On a personal level, we (with our families and friends) cherish birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and other important dates and events. It is good to remember. It is good to look back—because in hindsight we are more able to clearly see God’s blessings to us. Whenever we celebrate (as the Israelites did for several generations, gathering at the memorial by the Jordan River to recall God’s parting of the water), it’s important that we do so with recognition of God. He is the source of all life and its blessings. He deserves our thanks and praise. When our nation celebrates its independence 10 days from now, many believers in our country will go beyond the secular events of fireworks and parades and picnics. They will offer thanks to the Lord for His amazing providence in allowing our nation to be born, against all odds, and to become for the world a “city on a hill” offering freedom and hope. I’m convinced that America would not exist had God not intervened for us.

Worthy of Respect

Let's return to the conclusion of Joshua 4.

¹⁴That day the LORD made Joshua a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites, and for the rest of his life they revered him as much as they had revered Moses.

¹⁵The LORD had said to Joshua, ¹⁶“Command the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant to come up out of the riverbed.” ¹⁷So Joshua gave the command. ¹⁸As soon as the priests carrying the Ark of the LORD's Covenant came up out of the riverbed and their feet were on high ground, the water of the Jordan returned and overflowed its banks as before.

¹⁹The people crossed the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month. Then they camped at Gilgal, just east of Jericho. ²⁰It was there at Gilgal that Joshua piled up the twelve stones taken from the Jordan River.

²¹Then Joshua said to the Israelites, “In the future your children will ask, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ²²Then you can tell them, ‘This is where the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ ²³For the LORD your God dried up the river right before your eyes, and he kept it dry until you were all across, just as he did at the Red Sea when he dried it up until we had all crossed over. ²⁴He did this so all the nations of the earth might know that the LORD's hand is powerful, and so you might fear the LORD your God forever.”

Joshua 4:14-24 (NLT)

The result of this amazing triumph was that the people were renewed in their faith in God, and also confirmed in their trust in Joshua, the person God had elevated to a place of leadership. “For the rest of his life they revered [Joshua] as much as they had revered Moses.” We know from reading the story that Joshua himself didn't stop the waters of the Jordan. That was God's doing. But the Lord used Joshua as His chosen instrument, and the people rightly gave him honor and respect because of his office as the leader appointed by God.

Respect for leaders is something that can be weakened and diminished in a form of government like ours. Because we have the power to choose our leaders, we tend to diminish them. And, regrettably, the past few years have seen a dramatic decline in respect for leadership, to our nation's detriment. When Hollywood characters and comedians can degrade themselves with profane references to the President and his family, it cheapens our society. By no means should Christians ever worship an earthly king or leader, for we know they are imperfect sinners as we are. But it does no good to anyone to abandon respect for those who are in authority over us. The people of Israel, even though they knew Joshua wasn't perfect, nevertheless honored him—and in doing so they honored God.

Fear the Lord

The story ends with the priests emerging last from the dry riverbed, the Ark on their shoulders, and at that moment the waters returned to their normal flood stage. As the final verse of the chapter says, "He did this so all the nations of the earth might know that the LORD's hand is powerful, and so you might fear the LORD your God forever." The phrase "the fear of the LORD" is repeated throughout the Old Testament.

The Hebrews felt that the term "fear" expressed the proper attitude towards God. But this "fear of God" is not the same as the fear we might have for something that threatens us or is dangerous to us. It is certainly true that the Canaanites had reason to be afraid of God's judgment and rejection of their corrupt society and its evil and injustice. They were about to experience the consequences if they did not repent and plead for mercy as Rahab had.

But for the people who belong to God and have placed themselves under His care and protection, there is no more reason for that kind of fear. Rather, the "fear of the Lord" that we His children have is an expression of awe, reverence, devotion and submission to His will.

The person who truly "fears the Lord" will have nothing else to fear in all of life and death. ■