

A Lectionary 31 11.5.23

Joshua 3:7-17

Focus Statement: It takes a village.

We're going to talk about All Saints this morning, but first I want to talk about Joshua.

Because we only get two weeks with the whole book of Joshua, and I'm out of town for one of them, so we've got to get our Joshua fix in quick. Last week, we heard how God took Moses up "from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo" which is across the Jordan River from Jericho. And from that vista, God showed Moses all the land west of the Jordan, "the land of which [God] swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob saying, [that God] 'will give it to your descendants.'" So, the Israelites are there, right on the cusp, they can see the land. They just have to get there. And the only thing standing between them and the fulfillment of this long-ago promise is the Jordan River.

Now, to be clear, the Jordan River, not a huge river. I mean, it's substantial. It's not something you're just easily strolling across. And the text tells us it's flood season, so it's running harder and faster than it would in the dry season. But still. We're talking like, the Kalamazoo River here, not the Mississippi River. There's something else going on here.

First there's just the general symbolic role bodies of water play in scripture. Bodies of water are always metaphors for chaos and uncertainty, for uncontrollable forces beyond our knowledge. Anytime there is a story in scripture about God controlling water, be it the voice of God over the waters of creation, Jesus calming the storm, or this story of Joshua leading the people through the Jordan, the undercurrent is this reminder that God is a God

with power over the forces of chaos. That at God's command, chaos will stop, held back from its path, unable to continue its eroding flow.

But there's even more than that. Because you might have noticed in my list of "God controlling water" stories, I left out the most famous one, which we read just a few weeks ago, when God led Moses to part the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape the Egyptian Army on dry ground. The Exodus story is bookended with these water crossings. Leaving Egypt, God empowered Moses to lead the people through the water with a great show of power. And now, forty years later, entering the Promised Land, God empowered Joshua to accomplish that same great show of power, holding back the Jordan River, so that the Israelites could enter triumphantly into the land God had promised their ancestors.

Two bodies of water, two leaders called and empowered by God, two miraculous crossings, at the beginning and ending of the journey. But there are differences between the two crossings beyond that one was Moses leaving Egypt and one was Joshua entering Canaan. Because as we've been reading these last few months, God's been working on these people in their time in the wilderness. This journey wasn't simply about getting from one place to another. It was about transforming the people of God from people controlled by the practice of slavery to people free in the Kingdom of God. They're not there yet, in terms of always having the whole how to live so that we, in words from well in the future from Joshua, "love God and love our neighbors," but they're moving there. They're getting there.

They have the laws God gave them to help shape them into that sort of a people in the ark of the covenant that they carry with them.

We see the fruits of that transformation in how this water crossing happened. When the journey started, the crossing was simply Moses raising up his arm to part the waters and bringing it down for the waters to recede. But here God said to Joshua, “select twelve men from the tribes of Israel,” have them carry the ark, the reminder of the living God’s continued presence with and among them into the Jordan. And “when the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord... rest in the waters of the Jordan,” it will be at that point that “the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

That image of twelve men, standing in the middle of where the Jordan had once flowed, holding the ark of the covenant as the whole nation streamed by around them, is what captured my attention in this passage. Because yes, Kalamazoo River-sized though the Jordan is, this is still a substantial amount of water. And it’s flood season. The idea of walking forward, carrying the most sacred symbol of your people, to the edge of the swollen Jordan River, overflowing its banks as it did every year at the time of the harvest, dipping their feet into the water. I can only imagine hoping against hope that they would not be carried away by the raging floods. And then standing there, holding the clearest demonstration of the continued presence of God among them, with the waters “rising up in a single heap,” as the entire nation walked across. Bearing the ark of the covenant was these priests’ job, but I think they probably expected they would bear it in worship, not standing

in the middle of a dangerously flooded river for the sake of the rest of the Israelites, so that they could pass to safety. Yet at God's command through Joshua, there they stood. And it was from the place where their feet planted, that the Lord through Joshua had the tribes gather stones to remember what God had done for them. We didn't read this part, but in chapter four God commanded them to build a memorial from these gathered stones so that "when your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord." You shall recount for your children the mighty works of God and remember all that God has done for you. And, in the twelve stones, you can also remember your ancestors who stood in the middle of that river holding the ark and holding off the water so that their people could cross through to freedom.

That remembering is what makes this such a great text for All Saints Day. Because, I'll be frank with you, I have never experienced God's voice in the way that Joshua or Moses did. And I wonder if that is why they build a memorial out of the rocks of the place where the priests stood, because for most of us that is where we see God the most clearly, in the people who will stand in the river for us, holding the faith until we can be brought across to it. This text invites us to remember the people in our lives who held the faith for us, who showed us the ways of God, who taught us to live in God's love. Some of those people are written in our book of remembrance, some are held in our hearts, and some are sitting in the chairs around you. All Saints Day is a reminder that faith is a community effort. We all at various points, hold the presence of the living God for each other, so we can all pass through into a deeper knowledge of God's love for us.

I wonder too if this is the work we are called to, to show up with our bodies and plant ourselves for the sake of others. I wonder if this text is an invitation for us to think about where God has called us to show up and plant our feet on behalf of others in our community. We've done that for the Hammond family twice this year, once at a reception for Maxine, and just last Tuesday so they could gather again and grieve Linda. We planted our feet at the Pride Festival, and muddy feet they were that day in the rain, when we declared that all people are made in God's image. We show up in worship. We worship communally not because God needs us to, but because we need to. Because we need each other. Our worship life is richer when we are all present in it. It's also why we say things like the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed together. Because the weight of these covenants, like the ark in this story, are too much to bear on our own. So we say them together, trusting that each of us holds parts for the other.

We are not all called to be Moses or Joshua, but we can all show up and hold the load on behalf of another. This multitude of saints, holding the light of God's presence for each other is what we celebrate on All Saints Day. Thanks be to God, who gives us such a great cloud of witnesses. Amen.