

“Tomorrow’s Remembering”

Joshua 3,4

October 20, 2002

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Jacob and his son Eli were traveling down the road from Jericho to Gilgal in eastern Israel when Jacob saw the sign that said “historical marker, 500 feet”.

I’m something of a history buff and so those signs intrigue me but not my kids, when they **were** kids.

So Jacob turned to Eli and says, “Have I told you about what happened at this place up ahead?”

To which Eli responded slightly exaggerating, “Only about a hundred times, dad.”

It had actually only been about two or three times but Jacob was so intent on his son Eli knowing and even feeling the significance of this place and what had happened 40 years earlier that he couldn’t help but turn in at the marker and stop the vehicle.

Getting out, Jacob turned to Eli and said, “Come on son, I want you to walk with me and relive the event.”

Eli rolled his eyes but he got out anyway – He could tell that his dad was going with or without him and a walk was better than sitting in the vehicle.

Jacob said nothing as they walked quietly up to a monument perched on the top of a rise that looked east out over the valley and river below.

Then he said, “Eli, do you see that high country on the other side of the valley?”

“Our family along with all the others had been living just beyond that for several months.

There were literally thousands of tents.

I was told there were over a million of us.

I figured it out – that meant that in each of the 12 groups of tents there were over 10,000 tents.

And each group of 10,000 tents was further divided into sections depending on who your great grandpa was.

And all the tents were in neat rows – all very orderly, very disciplined.

“Three days earlier we were told that we were breaking camp and moving to the closest hills you can see on the other side.

“It was exciting.

All my life I had heard about the Promised Land – the land that God had told Abraham would one day be ours.

I heard how we would one day live in real houses instead of tents, how our family would have land of our own, and how tall the wheat would be instead of the measly plants that grew in the sand we were accustomed to.

“Over the next days we moved everything to those hills you see on the other side of the valley and then it all began.

Eli had heard the story before but this time he noticed, as his dad continued to talk it was as if his dad was actually transported back 40 years and was again himself 10 years old.

Almost as if his son wasn't even there, Jacob began to reminisce.

“It was almost dark and I was still outside with my friends when Joshua's officers came into our section of tents with an important announcement from Joshua.

Joshua was kind of scary to me.

It wasn't that I was really afraid of him because I knew he was kind but it was just who he was – the leader – like he spoke for God.

“We were so excited about what was about to happen that I remember every word that was said: “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.”

Then the officers said to watch for the Ark of the Covenant that the priests would carry, and when it moved out, we should follow it.

Now if Joshua was kind of scary to me, the Ark of the Covenant was even more so – if Joshua spoke for God, the Ark seemed like it was God.

“And then I thought “Tomorrow, Tomorrow! – It’s finally happening, we’re going to cross the river.”

I don’t think I slept at all that night, I just laid awake thinking of what it would be like to finally be in the Promised Land.

My imagination ran wild.

“It was still dark in the morning when my dad began to move around getting things ready.

I jumped up and helped.

Before long it seemed that the entire camp was as busy as we were.

There was an excitement in the air.

Kids were running and jumping and moms were yelling trying to keep everyone together.

“By the time it was light we had everything packed up and were ready to move.

We didn’t have to wait long before we heard that the Ark of the Covenant was moving and we fell in line walking slowly toward the river.

“I hadn’t actually seen the river yet.

I had been told that there was a river to be crossed to get to the Promised Land and I had heard my parents talking in hushed tones wondering how we could possibly get across, but I was too excited to worry.

“Then as we moved toward the river I finally saw it.

It looked huge to me.

It was flood season and the water stretched from the hills we were on all the way to the hills on the other side.

We’d never lived near water and so we weren’t swimmers.

We had babies and old people, herds of sheep and wagons.

The river made it impossible.

“When we had finally moved far enough down the side of the hill that **everyone** could see what I saw, I heard people all around me wondering out loud the same thing I had been thinking – “What do we do now?”

“It was right then that one of Joshua’s officers came along side us, and said, **“This is how you will know that the living God is among you and will certainly drive out the enemies before you – when you see the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant step into the river you will also see the water stop flowing and the river bed dry up.”**

I didn’t know whether to believe the officer or not.

I looked over at my dad to get some idea of how to respond but I saw a confused look on his face that matched my own.

“Then with everyone else I turned back to watch the river.

I’m not sure what I expected but I couldn’t help but look.”

Jacob paused in the story and with a far away look was just staring at the river valley.

In spite of himself Eli found himself also staring and imagining the valley full of water and wondering what **he** would have expected to see happen next.

Jacob finally said, “I watched the priests carrying the Ark as they got to the edge of the water.

Would they stop?

“They walked right into the water and as they waded further toward the middle I did in fact see the most amazing thing.

The water began to get shallower not deeper.

And the water’s edge began to move further away from where we were.

And within minutes it was obvious that no more water was flowing from upstream and the river valley began to dry out.

Desert rat that I was, even I knew that rivers didn’t just all of the sudden quit flowing.

“It wasn’t long before the long line of people began to move - following the Ark out into what **had been** the river.

When our turn came and I reached where the water had been I looked carefully at the ground beneath my feet – it wasn’t wet, it wasn’t even marshy and soft, and it was dry.

“Everyone was talking excitedly and I had a thousand questions for my dad but then a hush fell over the stream of people and peeking out from the side of the line, I saw why.

Everyone was silent as we passed by where the priests stood right in the middle of the riverbed with the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders.

“Then it hit me, like apparently it was hitting everyone else – God was doing this, my God was doing this.

I would never again doubt his love and his ability.

Jacob stopped reminiscing and turning, walked back to the roadside memorial – a carefully erected stack of 12 large watermarked stones taken from the exact place where the priests had stood in the river.

He bowed his head and just stood there with tears streaming down his face.

Eli was himself 10 years of age and as he watched his father he was captured by the same awe and faith as he saw on his father’s face.

Eli hadn’t been there 40 years earlier but in a very real way he had.

The amazing, miraculous crossing of the Jordan River had been **his** crossing.

The God of his father Jacob was **his** God.

Never again would **he** doubt God’s love and ability.

The story I have just told is a retelling of the story given to us in Joshua chapters 3 and 4.

It is God’s intention that this story fills you with the same sense of awe of God and faith in his powerful love toward you that Israel had that day.

But I suspicion that for many of us, it has not done so.

We hear it in much the way that the Eli in my retelling of the story usually heard it – as somebody else’s story with no relevance to him.

But that is not true - **It is God’s intention that this story fills you with a sense of awe of God and faith in his powerful love toward you today.**

We come across a lot of flood-stage “Jordan Rivers” in our lives and crossing appears impossible. Where’s God we wonder?

In Joshua chapter 1 God gives his people a mission:

Joshua 1:2,6,9 “Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them--to the Israelites... "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them... for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

This is a mission with a promise.

As I said two weeks ago, I believe it is very intentional that Jesus’ command to us is given in similar language.

Matthew 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

We too have a mission and the same promise.

As we saw last week from Joshua chapter 2, the mission is not just about us but about God’s surprising grace even in the lives of those we consider the least likely.

Yes, there are those who oppose the Gospel of Jesus Christ but even in the midst of them God’s grace reaches to save.

The Jews had to learn that the good news was not for Jews only but for Gentiles as well.

We have to learn that the mission is not just to get our family and friends into the kingdom but that we are to be witnesses and to make disciples even among the least likely people and in the least likely

places – my neighbors, my co-workers, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, among the Hindus, the Moslems, the Mormons – the least likely.

Joshua chapters 3 & 4 demonstrate that God's presence and power is with us to accomplish the mission.

God chose to have the Israelites cross the Jordan River where and when he did for a very specific purpose.

Why couldn't they have marched around the south end of the Dead Sea and entered Canaan without crossing a river?

Why couldn't they have waited for the dry season when the river was a fraction of the size it was in flood stage?

God tells us why he did what he did.

In fact the reason is reiterated repeatedly in the telling of the story:

3:5 "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."

3:10 "This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out" (the enemies so that you may accomplish your mission.)

4:6-7 "In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD... (Tell them what God did!)

4:21-24 "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them... the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over... **He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.**"

As I said earlier when you become a Christian and adopt Jesus' mission for you – the mission of making disciples, you will likely come across many flood-stage "Jordan Rivers" in your life and the crossing will appear impossible.

And God says, when that happens I want you to remember **this** crossing of the Jordan River.

You might be tempted with me to say, “Yes, the Jordan River crossing was a great experience for your “Jacob” and the Israelites who witnessed it but what about your “Eli” and the rest of us who weren’t there?”

Very candidly that is the way I was thinking at first as I began to prepare this message.

I thought the story of the crossing of the Jordan is a great story but I’ll need to find contemporary illustrations of God’s miraculous intervention if anybody is going to be **impressed** with God.

And then I thought that won’t work very well because even if the stories are phenomenal, we are such skeptics that if it didn’t happen to us personally we will find a way to dismiss its relevance to us.

We think, “Sure maybe God works in other people’s lives but not in mine.”

And then I thought even if I could find an illustration from each person’s life, most of us are wired so that yesterday’s miracle doesn’t suffice for today.

We think, “Sure God did that yesterday but this is a new situation and I don’t know if he’ll come through again.”

That’s when I was struck with Joshua chapter 4.

Chapter 3 is all about the “amazing thing” that God did.

But chapter 4 is about the memorial they were to erect.

The Lord told Joshua to have one man from each of the 12 tribes of Israel pick up a stone from the middle of the river where the priests had stood and to use those stones to erect a memorial to the event.

But note specifically who the memorial is for:

- Joshua 4:6 “In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them...”

- Joshua 4:21 ““In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them...”
It was for those who **weren’t** there when it happened!

And what response did God expect the memorial to elicit:

- Joshua 3:10 “This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the” enemies so that you may accomplish your mission.)
- Joshua 4:24 “He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.”

That’s right! He expected **those who weren’t even there** to be as impressed with the “amazing things” God did as were those who were there.

That’s right! He expected that **those who weren’t there** would be so impressed that they would always fear the Lord.

If I anchor my faith in contemporary experiences I will forever need new experiences and I will forever be at the mercy of my and others’ interpretations of those experiences.

I say God did such and such an amazing thing in my life but before long I begin to wonder how amazing it really was.

I recall how God healed me or how God rescued me and then I begin to wonder how much coincidence had to do with it or what other natural explanations were more plausible than a miracle of God.

But if I anchor my faith in the God-attested miraculous experiences of his people as recorded in his Word I can know without doubt that what happened is truly an illustration of one thing only – God’s gracious and powerful intervention on behalf of his people.

And that includes me because that God is with me as I live and pursue the mission he has given us.

My experiences are subject to misinterpretation.

But when God interprets an experience, I can count on it.

Let me illustrate:

Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus?

I dare say **not one of you** was at the garden tomb the Sunday morning following the resurrection of Jesus.

I dare say not one of you **knows anyone** who was at the garden tomb the Sunday morning following the resurrection of Jesus.

I dare say not one of you **knows anyone** who **knows anyone** who was at the garden tomb the Sunday morning following the resurrection of Jesus.

Do we need to be at the tomb on Sunday morning and listen to an angel and then see Jesus himself physically present in order for us to **know** it happened?

NO. We have a far greater testimony to the fact than our selective and fading memories – **we have the sure Word of God.**

Jesus to Thomas who believed only after seeing and touching,

John 20:29 "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

How do you know that your God is with you and is powerful to lead you across the "flooding Jordans" of your life?

- Because you think he found you a parking place when you needed it badly?
- Because you survived a disease or a surgery that could have been fatal?

No.

I don't disparage those kindnesses of God – they are part of his good and perfect gifts for which we should be thankful.

But they are not the anchor of my faith.

My faith is anchored in the testimony of the sure Word of God.

I know my God is with me and powerful to accomplish the mission he has given me because **he did** stop that Jordan River.

And when necessary he will do so for me.

William Blaikie wrote, "It is a happy era in one's spiritual history when one escapes from one's contracted views of the love and liberality of God, and begins to realize that "as far as heaven is above the earth, so far are his ways above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts; and when one comes to find that in one's times of need, whether arising from one's personal condition or from the requirements of public service, one may go to God for encouragement and help with more certainty of being well received than one may to the best and kindest of (earthly) friends." (Blaikie 104)

My God stopped that Jordan River and when necessary he will stop it for me.