

“Moving Day”

Joshua 3:1-17

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I suspect many thought this day would never come. It had been forty years since the Israelites left Egypt under Moses’ leadership in search of a peaceful and prosperous homeland.

I am confident no one dreamed it would take this long to get to the land God promised Moses, but it did. Now, however, their wandering days were coming to an end because it was time to cross the Jordan River and to begin the final leg of this epic journey.

Moving day finally arrived.

Joshua, Moses’ successor, led the Israelites to the eastern edge of the Jordan River. There they faced a challenge similar to the one they encountered at the Red Sea soon after leaving Egypt forty years earlier. The Jordan River was at flood stage due to heavy spring rains and melting snow on Mount Hermon. The current was unmercifully swift.

How were they going to cross safely to the other side?

Joshua instructed his people to set up camp for three days. He encouraged them to make final preparations, physically and spiritually. This meant getting rid of excess baggage and strengthening their faith through repentance and prayer.

At the same time, Joshua sent two spies across the river to Jericho. He wanted them to discover what kind of reception they would receive or resistance they would face after crossing the river and moving into Canaanite territory.

When the spies returned, they told Joshua of Rahab's hospitality. This courageous woman befriended and protected the two Hebrew spies while providing the information they needed to take back to Joshua.

The spies told Joshua the citizens of Jericho were aware of the Israelites' nearby presence and were faint of heart. They knew they were no match for the emboldened Hebrews and their faithful God.

This was the good news Joshua had hoped to hear. It affirmed his decision to carry out his plans to cross over the Jordan and to enter this land of hope and promise.

Moses sent officers to each tribe along the river and told them to gather their belongings. The officers instructed every tribe to begin moving when the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant passed their way.

One by one the tribes lined up along the Jordan River. One man from each tribe was selected to accompany the priests to the edge of the water. In unison the priests and the representatives from the twelve tribes stepped into the water. As they did, the waters parted, much like they did for Moses at the Red Sea, and the children of Israel once again passed through on dry ground.

Once everyone had safely crossed, the water began flowing again. After living in Egypt for over four hundred years and wandering in the wilderness for forty more, the Israelites finally stood on land that would belong to them and their descendants.

I never cease to be amazed at the courage of the ancient Israelites. Their journeys often took them from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar and the secure to the insecure places of life, which is frightening under the best of circumstances.

How were they able to travel down uncharted roads, or in this case, over the deep and dangerous waters flowing in the Jordan River? They had faith in God and God's appointed leader, Joshua. Apparently, this faith--a faith stronger than their fears--gave them the confidence they needed to live into their hopes and dreams.

Do you have this kind of faith?

There are times in all our lives when we must move in new directions and travel down unfamiliar roads. How do we do this, especially when nothing around us looks the same or makes us feel comfortable? How do we even begin a journey of this nature when we are anxious, worried or frightened?

Like the Israelites, we must keep our eyes on God and listen carefully to the advice of the family members and friends God sends to accompany us. If we do, our faith will not let us down.

Joshua told the people not to begin moving toward the Jordan River until the Ark of the Covenant passed their way. He also instructed them to remain one thousand yards from the ark as they made their way to the water.

Why? If they got too close, the people in the other tribes would be unable to see it.

Why was it important for everyone in all twelve tribes to see the ark? The ark represented the presence of God in their midst. Their faith would be strengthened and their doubts would diminish each time they looked at it.

And where was the ark as they marched through the parted waters of the Jordan River? The priests positioned it in the middle of the river bed. Each tribe would pass by it and be assured that God was not just with them on the banks of the Jordan but also in the river, the scariest part of their journey.

We all need a faith greater than our fears, don't we? We need to know God is with us in our darkest hours and most dangerous places.

God understands and wants this for us, too. This is why the same words of assurance God gave to Moses and Joshua, words they shared with all the Israelites, are meant for us on our journeys.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will go with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

“...wherever you go.” No exceptions given; therefore this includes a doctor’s office, a hospital, a rehab facility, a wedding chapel, a funeral home, a lawyer’s office, a courtroom, a counselor’s quarters, an AA meeting, a job interview, a new job, a fitness center, a mission trip, a town hall meeting, a new Sunday school class, a baptistery or down a church aisle.

I like this open-ended promise.

What river do you need to cross today? What river stands between you and your dreams, like the Jordan did for the Israelites? What river stands between you and a new and better life?

How often have you thought about crossing it? How many times have you walked up to the edge only to turn back?

Charting a new course is never easy. If you have ever started a new job, changed careers or opened a business, you know how intimidating it is. If you have left home to go to college or the military, you do, too.

If you have buried a mate or ended a marriage, you know what it is like to face a raging river. If you have moved to a new city or given up bad habits, you know what a steep challenge looks like.

If you have walked into a church without knowing where everybody usually sits, you know what awkward feels like. If you have picked up the microphone as an advocate and spoken on behalf of those who have no voice at the table where decisions are made, you know all about butterflies in your stomach and lumps in your throat.

And yet, a new and better life for us and others often demands we do these very things.

Let me share with you the most interesting fact I discovered about the way this dramatic story is written. Twenty-two times in Joshua 3 and 4 the word cross or crossing is mentioned.

Twenty-two is a lot in just two chapters.

Why the emphasis upon this word? People of faith don't let anything keep them from living into God's dreams for them. No river is too intimidating, too deep or too dangerous.

I wonder what you and I would do this week if we really believed this.