

Wet Feet First

Matthew 14:22-36 (Joshua 3:9-17)

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Many people didn't know it was possible, but, against all odds, I've done it: I have crossed another threshold of pandemic fatigue. And, you know, based on several conversations that I have had, I'd guess the same is true for many of you. Last week felt like a very long month.

I'm going to do something different today. I'm going to show you my cards right from the start. This sermon has a very simple message, and it's this: In the times of uncertainty, of upheaval, when it's hard to know how or if we can go forward, God invites us to rise and to walk in faith, all the while assuring us of God's abiding presence along the way.

At a time when the people of Israel were dispersed and separated from each other, when they couldn't be together as they wanted, to worship, to live and to be, the prophet Isaiah carried a similar message from God.

Isaiah, chapter 43, verses 1 to 3.

*But now, this is what the Lord says --
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.*

*For I am the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. [. . .]*

Do you notice something in these verses?

God doesn't say, I will be with you

"if" you pass through the waters,
or "if" you pass through the rivers,
or "if" you walk through the fire.

No, God assumes it, it's as if people should expect it, count on it, prepare for it,
but, as they do so, they should know
that the One who created them, redeemed them, claimed them,

well, that One would be with them,
and the waters would not sweep over them.

In other words, they're going to get their feet wet,
but, God will, too,
because God is walking right beside them.

It makes me think of another story.

It's from Joshua, chapter 3.

After wandering in the wilderness for forty years.
the people of Israel can see the Promised Land.
They can see it – literally – from across the Jordan River.
They can almost taste the milk and the honey.
All they have to do is cross . . .
but, instead, they decide to camp for three days.

Three days. Think about it.

They had wandered in the wilderness
day after day after day, for forty years,
dragging along their sleeping bags, their flimsy camping utensils,
the stock piles of graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate.
People are grouchy, everything is sticky.

And when they finally see their destination, the place of God's promise,
the home that they had dreamed about, planned for, prepared for,
they decide . . . to set up camp and to stay for another three days.
They camped in the parking lot of the Promised Land.
Why didn't they just to get on with it?

The Israelites lingered beside the Jordan River,
and the storyteller of the book of Joshua wants us as listeners and readers
to linger beside them.

In Joshua, chapters three and four, the river crossing is mentioned twenty-one times.
Twenty-one references in two chapters.
The word "Jordan" is used twenty-eight times, and that's a record that stands to this day.
That's more than once in every two verses.
The storyteller uses it. Joshua uses it. Even God says it again and again.
And when you read these two chapters, you feel like saying, okay, I get it.
The river. The Crossing. It's important. But why is it important?
I'm sorry if I'm spoiling the ending, but, yes, the waters part,
and, yes, the people cross the Jordan on dry land,
but, come on, we've seen those special effects before, right?
The Exodus. Sequels are never as good as the original.

You know, I think the storyteller is driving home a point for the listeners,
and maybe the point is as simple as this:

The time in-between where you've been

and where you're going should not be neglected or overlooked.

That's because the crossing itself has value, it's an essential part of the story.

Our goal is not to get through this pandemic, although we'd surely like that.

Our goal is to be faithful in the midst of it.

When we talk about change, when we encounter transition,
when we seek the plans that God has for us as individuals and us as a church
when we think about where we've been and where we're going,
we shouldn't forget that where we plant our feet right now

must be consistent with the destination we seek.

Put another way, if we are truly seeking the kingdom of God,

we better be doubly sure that we're at least parked in the right parking lot.

The Jordan River is the gateway to the Promised Land.

At the time of year and place where Joshua was,

the Jordan would have been at flood stage:

ten to twelve feet deep and one hundred and forty feet wide.

And so the river was a real moment of testing -- a defining moment --

a moment to look back on and remember once they made it to the other side.

For three days, the people of Israel camped in the parking lot of the Promised Land.

For three days, they contemplated the barrier that stood in their way.

For three days, they knew that they were so close but so very far away.

For three days, they had no idea how they could cross such a raging scary river.

For three days, the disciples mourned outside the tomb of Jesus,

thinking that they had been so close to the kingdom,

but now thinking only of how death divided them from their hope.

We human beings tend to divide our lives into bright lines.

We divide time into decades. Years. Months. Days.

Morning. Night. Hours. Minutes. Seconds.

Dates of birth and dates of death are listed on our gravestones.

But as we go through life, we are not to forget that we make our living in the in-between.

We're adolescents, we are always changing,

we are always becoming, but we are not there yet.

To desire a season without change, a time without transition, is to desire a myth.

It doesn't exist. Life is change. Life is transition.

We are constantly being uprooted and replanted again and again and again.

But how do we know if we are going the right way?

How do we know if we are even circling the right parking lot?

The Lord said to Joshua, "Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river."

How do you know if the way you walk is the way of the Lord?
Well, first, you've got to get your feet wet.

I think that means that we can't just sit idly by waiting for something to happen.
I think that means that we need to take a step of faith
before the waters part and God shows the way forward.

The priests had to get their feet wet before those raging waters parted.
I think most of us sincerely desire to live within God's will, to do what God wants us to do.
But I think we often are too passive, too careful, too afraid to be wrong,
to even put our feet in the water that we desire to cross.
We want to cross the river without the inconvenience of wet feet.

Matthew 14:22-36

*After Jesus had just finished feeding thousands of people
with five loaves of bread and two fish,
he made the disciples get into the boat
and go on ahead of him to the other side.
After he had dismissed the crowd,
Jesus went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.
Later that night, the boat was already a considerable distance from land,
buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

*Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them,
walking on the water.
When the disciples saw him walking on the lake,
they were terrified.
"It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.
But Jesus immediately said to them:
"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."
"Come," he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat,
walked on the water and came toward Jesus.
But when he saw the wind, he was afraid
and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"
Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.
"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"
And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.
Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying,
"Truly you are the Son of God."*

We see this story as Peter's failure, his lack of faith.
But I think it's a story about what even little faith can do.
Peter got his feet wet.
Yes, he sunk, but he was the only disciple who got out of the boat.
And even though his doubts and fears caused him to sink,
even so, is there any better way to be gripped than in the hand of Jesus?

Yes, in this time of uncertainty, upheaval,
in whatever changes and challenges you are facing,
pray for God's direction, discern the Holy Spirit's leading,
use the wisdom, and experience, and training
that God has given you to help you make good decisions.

But at some point, we have to put our best wet foot forward and walk.
Sometimes, we want everything so protected,
all potential risks eliminated,
that we also eliminate the role of faith.
But just as the Jordan River parted when the priests got in the water,
just as Peter walked on the Sea of Galilee when he got out of the boat,
we must be willing to take a step of faith, to put our best wet foot forward.

And you know,
Maybe the waters will part.
Or maybe you will be okay for a while but then start to sink.
But either way, I believe that we will wind up in the hand of Jesus.
And that's a fine place to park.

*But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you. (Isaiah 43)*

And now to the One
who is able to keep you from stumbling
and to present you before God's glorious presence without fault and with great joy—
to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Judge 1:24-25)