

Joshua 3:7-14
Between Egypt and Canaan
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
9-13-15

About 10 years ago, a woman named Ashley Smith faced a moment that would change the course of her life forever—in a pivotal moment, her response would be the difference between life and death, freedom and addiction, hope and desperation.

You might have read in the news the story of a very troubled young man named Brian Nichols, who, in a very violent course of events, opened fire in a courtroom, killing a judge and then proceeding to go on a shooting spree killing four people in the city of Atlanta. He was on the run, and the city was in a state of lock down. Then he found himself holed up in Ashley Smith's apartment, holding her hostage.

This violent young man, who was doing the unthinkable in order to see his son one last time, was together in the apartment with a young woman who herself was at the end of her rope in a sense. Ashley was a recovering meth addict, who had lost custody of her two children and had lost her husband to an overdose, as well.

These two unlikely people find themselves together in the same place, both facing a crossroads of sorts. How we respond in this moment will shape our lives forever.

Ashley had begun to attend a group for individuals recovering from addictions called Celebrate Recovery—a Christian program created by the author and pastor Rick Warren, and on her table was a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*. Miraculously in that moment, Brian Nichols asked Ashley to start reading this book, one that talks about the person of Jesus and the future and purpose he has for our lives, to him.

Brian and Ashley sat there together, each at a crossroads of sorts. Brian at one point asked Ashley if she had any drugs in the house, which she did, but choosing to press forward, Ashley denied having any in her possession—thereby preventing the two of them from taking that well-worn path of bad decisions trod so often in their pasts. Instead, these two sat and let the words of this book wash over them, telling them of their value in God's eyes and that he had a purpose and future for each of them.

There are times in our lives when we stand in between our past and our future. And how we respond in that moment can be the difference between becoming more fully alive, bearers of God's divine image, and being duped once more into accepting the cheap substitute the enemy has to offer. Maybe you have found yourself in a moment like this, wondering whether there is a future for you looking down the neck of a bottle, or whether that one next purchase will bring the heretofore elusive happiness. We face these moments all the time.

This morning's text is from the Book of Joshua. In it, God's people, the Israelites, find themselves in between their past—a life of bondage and captivity in Egypt—and their future – the future God was leading them toward, in the Promised Land.

And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And you shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'...And when the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be stopped from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap a great distance away."

Let us pray. *Let the good news come now, Father, not only in word but in power and with great assurance. As we stand in the middle, between the wilderness and the Promised Land, may we be reminded that our past is filled with your presence and our future is filled with your promise. Be with us now we pray, for we do so not in our own strength, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ. And all of God's people said, Amen.*

When the Israelites stepped out into the Jordan, they were standing in between the wilderness and the Promised Land. And that's really the central point of what I want to share with you this morning. Our life together as Christ followers is lived between the wilderness and the Promised Land

Speaking of places in between the wilderness and the Promised Land, I was recently in Chicago. I was there to see the World's Greatest Rock Band, U2. Don't try and dispute that claim; it's science! And at that concert Bono, Edge, Larry, and Adam played one of their most well-known and loved songs. A song that is all about living in between the Wilderness and the Promised Land. It goes a little something like this.

*I have climbed the highest mountain,
I have run through the fields.
Only to be with you. Only to be with you.*

*I have run, I have crawled,
I have scaled these city walls, these city walls,
Only to be with you*

And help me with the last lines

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

What stood between the Israelites and their future with God was a rushing barrier, the Jordan River. Unlike some of the other cultures of the time – like the Egyptians and the Nile, or the Indians and the Gangees – the Jordan River was not a sacred thing. It was not

a part of their cultural identity. The Jordan represented the difference between being safe in one place and surrounded by unfamiliar and potentially threatening neighbors in another. You see, on the other side were the Canaanites who saw the river as part of their fertility god Baal worship. When the river was high, it provided a strong barrier between them and their enemies, the Israelites. But for the Israelites, it was really just a barrier between them and the plan that God had laid out.

Now it says in the text that when Joshua and the Levite Priests approached the water, it was in flood stage. So here they are faced with a dilemma. There was no sticking their toe in to feel the temperature and gauge the flow. It was all or nothing. They would either step out and the water would separate or they would step out and be swept away by the rushing current. The decision before them was to either step out in faith, or remain in that old, familiar, dry, wilderness place.

I think this is important for us, as a community. God is inviting us to full commitment. There's no way to keep one foot on shore and one in the water. We've got to take that first step.

When God calls the Israelites out into the water, he says something that is totally amazing. Look with me at the second half of verse 8. There it says: **When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.** Later in verse 17 it says: **While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan.**

It's as if God is saying to them, get to know this "in between" place well, because this is where we live. Many people come to church looking for concrete truth to hold on to, and this may sound more like a tension. But this is, in fact, the concrete truth of where we live. We're not yet in heaven, and we still live in a fallen and broken world. We're in the "already, but not yet" place in life. And so God invites us to get to know that place in the middle of the river, not yet in the Promised Land and no longer in the wilderness.

This is a really important distinction because of the way it often plays itself out in our culture. What I notice is that many times people prefer to live in one place or another. Some are already in the Promised Land: they have no non-Christian friends, they live in a bubble, their lives are contained and safe. And when bad things happen in the world they tend to ignore them and continue in their little Promised Land bubble. The other group is one I have seen many times in my few years of ministry. They're those Christ followers who wallow in the wilderness, transfixed on the brokenness or pain or problems that are going on in their lives, and they're either unable or unwilling to see that God has a new life that they can live into through his Grace, but that would mean letting go of their wilderness security blanket.

We live in between the Promised Land and the wilderness. We live in a place where God has already offered redemption through the cross, but we are not quite there yet. Allow me to give you an example of what this looks like. In Jewish music composition, major notes are often followed by a minor note. You all recognize the song "Hava Nagila."

Well, the major note is called the Promised Land note, and the minor note is called the Wilderness note. Promised Land note, Promised Land note, Wilderness note... Is your life made up of all Wilderness notes or Promised Land notes? Do you have them woven together, or is one more characteristic of you?

The second lesson we're being shown here, I think, is that God invites us to lean into the Promised Land. We're all going to have times of Wilderness experience in life, that much is for sure. But how we choose to orient our lives during that time makes all the difference. Do we sit down like Job and wallow in our sorrow, or do we choose to lean into the Promised Land?

Ashley Smith could have looked back and seen her old life, and in this intense moment of crisis, she could have very easily chosen the well-worn, too often trod path, the wide path Jesus describes that leads to destruction. But instead, she chose to listen to the message she had heard from her support group, and lean into those words.

Temptation and testing is something that every person who chooses to follow Jesus will encounter, simply because that is what Jesus encountered in his own life. Before his ministry began, the devil brought him out into the desert to test him. Three times in fact. He said to Jesus, turn those stones into bread; throw yourself off this building; command the angels to rescue you. And do you know how Jesus responds in the end? Five short words: **Get thee behind me Satan.** Jesus leans out of the wilderness, refusing to let the snares and temptations drag him back into that dry and barren place.

Ashley Smith, in the power of the Holy Spirit, not only stood strong and courageous in that moment, but she also helped prevent another person from falling back into enslavement. And because she had the courage to lean into the future God had for her, God worked through her in Brian's life, too.

Sitting together, as she read aloud the words of Rick Warren, that apartment became a hospital room. In their time together, Ashley read the entire book, and by the time she was through, Brian was ready to surrender his life to Jesus, as well. Because in this other person who had undergone a transformation of heart, he saw his own future, a future that would invariably involve prison time. But a future in which his heart and his soul would finally be free.

If you find yourself in the middle of the Jordan River, standing in between your past and your future—stay there. Looking back, you can see how God uses those decisions and experiences to shape your present. And as you look forward, to the future God is preparing for you, remember there may be someone who needs you to take their hand and lean in together.