

**After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, (who is Nun? A nobody.), 2 The Lord said, "Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land which I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. 3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. Now on to verse 5, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. 6 Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. 8 This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."**

*Come now Holy Spirit into these moments we share together. Fill us this morning with that unmistakable peace and that unshakable strength of your presence with us. Gird us, prepare us to cross the rivers of life that we face, no matter if it's a trickling stream or white water rapids. And we know you will for we pray not in our own strength, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ who is our savior and Lord. Amen and Amen.*

Well this morning we are continuing our series of messages entitled "Crossing Life's Rivers." Last week we looked at how Isaiah reminds us that no matter where we go and what the future looks like, we walk through...with God; walk through...with God.

Well today I want to journey with you back to the book of Joshua, and look at dramatic crossing. When we encounter this passage Joshua and the Israelites have been in the wilderness for 40 years, now whether that was the actual figure or not we're unsure, but we do know that an entire generation lived and died there in the Wilderness. But it wasn't just the 40 years, they were standing on the cusp of the promised land that was promised to them nearly 440 years earlier when it was promised to Abraham.

So here we are with the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan River, feet sore and swollen, faces tight from too much sun and not enough water, but we're finally here at the banks of the Promised Land. Looking back at where we've been we can see the long, hot, circuitous journey through the desert of Sinai. Even though we've made it, seems we took the longest route possible. And the distance from where we were Egypt to where we are now could have taken 40 days or so, but we've been at this journey for 40 years. God could have brought us along this passage by the straight, even, well-resourced road along the sea called the Way of the Philistines. That would have gotten us to where we want to be quickly, with little resistance.

But that's not the route God took us. No coming out of Egypt God took us south, down along a journey that had no resources, only threat. When we got to the Red Sea all we saw was the vast expanse of wilderness. And as our children learn in their Godly Play Lesson around the desert box—you only go into the desert if you absolutely have to. No one idealizes nature and living off the land when you're in the desert. No, we wanted to get through it as fast as we can. The desert was a hard road, with little in the way of resources.

I feel like this is a good metaphor for my sojourn in homeschooling and sheltering in place. Three weeks in and already I'm out of resources.

Why is it that God led us through the wilderness? Why did we have to take the long way? Why is it never easy street to the Promised Land.

Because God wants you to be free. And there is no easy way to find freedom. The only way we find freedom is by learning to walk with God one day at a time. One step at a time, one manna at a time.

And so here we are, we've made it to the banks of this river, there's a new young leader in Joshua, and the people are worried about what they'll find when they cross into this new territory, into the future that God is always leading us into. It wasn't the actual river that unnerved them, it was the uncertainty that lie ahead of them that made them waver. We don't know what's next? What if we face adversity? What if our resources aren't enough? What if life looks different in this new place compared to what we're used to? What if...what if...what if?

Sound familiar?

Over the next few weeks I would like to encourage you to think about the river you are crossing in your life right now.

The first thing that God says to Joshua in verse 6 is: **“Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous.”** This is one of those biblical phrases that echoes throughout the Bible. The Hebrew word here is a gritty and guttural one Chazaq, say that with me Chazaq to your tv screen, Chazaq! Say that with me to the person sitting next to you, Chazaq! Say that with me once more, Chazaq! When God is talking to Joshua here God says Chazaq “Be strong and courageous.” But what's important to understand here is that Chazaq strength and courage is not something we muster with all our might, it's not something we achieve by pulling up our bootstraps. The strength that Joshua had to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan River into the Promised Land was from God.

If you get nothing else out of this message today hear this, our strength comes from God. A favorite passage of many, one that often quietly spoken at in times of trouble, at the bedside of

the infirmed, and in the living rooms of those who mourn is Psalm 46: God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble, therefore we will not fear.

Jesus picks this up in Luke 17:21 when he's asked where is the kingdom of God? And responds the kingdom of God is within you. If you sincerely seek me ye shall find me, within. God's strength comes to you, and is manifest in you through his Word.

But this morning I want to say something about strength, and that is that God calls us to be strong independent of the outcome. God calls us to be strong independent of the outcome. Sometimes the true measure of a person's strength and character is displayed when they're on the losing end.

In college I played on the Baseball team at St. Olaf, it was not an illustrious career. I did however have the privilege of being on the roster alongside the best group of players I've ever had the privilege of playing with. But at my position, one year ahead of me was a guy named Brian who would go on to play professionally for the Dodgers. Most of the action I saw was running the foul line in between innings to keep my legs warm on the off chance I was called on to be a pinch hitter or runner.

But then came my senior year and now it was my chance. And I made the most of that chance...for a while. Soon my batting began to slip and a few unfortunate errors in the field landed me back on the bench. I remember calling my dad one night after I made an error that cost us a game, and I was in tears. I said dad I failed, I did bad. And he told me something I'll never forget, he said be strong in the Lord when you're good, and be strong in the Lord when you're bad. You see the strength that comes from God from within equips us even when we're bad, even when we fail.

So from that day I made the decision, knowing what few precious weeks I had remaining and the great group of friends surrounding me, that I was going to keep a great attitude and lead

from the bench, be an encourager, support the younger guys out there on the field, even though it was tremendously difficult not being out on the field day in and day out.

Then came our final game of the season in the regional tournament, and we were losing by a wide margin, when the coach looked at me and signaled for me to pinch-hit. Well I made the most of that opportunity and ended my college career with a high note. And after the game the assistant coaches came to me and shook my hand and said how proud they were of how I handled being sidelined earlier and sticking with it to the end. The only way I knew how to handle being on the losing end was to stand tall, to keep focus on the strength God was cultivating within me in that time.

God calls us to be strong independent of the outcomes. God calls us to be strong when we're good and successful; and God calls us to be equally strong when we fail, when we're bad. Strength stands by itself, and if we tie it to the material successes of our life, we are bound to be disappointed.

Secondly, how do we sustain this strength? We stay strong by remaining connected to God.

Joshua had a remarkable task before him. It says earlier in the book of Numbers, in chapter 26 that the number of people (read here Jewish males) who crossed the Jordan were over 600,000. Now taking into this figure women and children, there were likely well over a million and possibly closer to two that Joshua was to lead. Not even Joel Osteen can boast of these numbers. So how does Joshua sustain strength to lead, strength for the journey? He does so by remaining connected to God, by meditating on God's word.

Two times it says be strong and courageous, only the second time it says be strong and courageous and here is how you do it, by meditating on God's law or God's word. Don't let it depart from your mouth, bring it with you wherever you go. We can remain strong by remaining When the bible repeats itself like this we know it's an important cue. Throughout

the gospels Jesus makes a statement that begins with: “Truly, truly I say unto you” 25 times. When he repeats this word truly, what he’s saying is listen carefully because what I have to say next is of paramount significance.

God says to Joshua Be strong and very courageous and we do this be remaining connected through God’s Word. You see it’s not enough just to know about God’s Word, or believe that it’s true. We must be connected to it, literally grounded to our foundation.

You see it’s only when we are connected to God’s word, when we let it marinate in our lives, when the promises that God speaks over us, promises like **“I will never leave you or forsake you; lo I am with you even until the end of the age; promises like, the wage of sin is death, but the gift of God is everlasting life; I am going to prepare a place for you and if I go I will return to get you; promises like the one so well known and beloved that even sporting events proclaim it’s promise that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”**

These are the promises we have at our fingertips when we are connected to God’s Word. So, I ask us today, do we and will we lay hold of the courage that is available through that deep and abiding trust in God?

It may be the very thing that keeps us standing when gale force winds come against us.

What Joshua tells us is that we can have hope beyond heartache, strength over every obstacle, peace that defies understanding, and it comes from a connection to the living God in Jesus Christ. Stepping out into the rivers we must cross is possible, not only that, it’s necessary because God has said it is my strength that goes with you. It is my power that will hold you up when you don’t have the strength. It is the hope that I have for this world that will enable you to stand firm.

This morning we read from Ephesians, that famous passage that describes the spiritual armor God gives us for the battle—because let’s face it, so often life is just that, it’s a battle. And before Paul lays out this marvelous illustration of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the spirit and so on; Paul tell us to take up the armor of God so that we will be able to...what?...stand firm. Stand firm. To not be shaken, swayed to the left or right, discouraged or disheartened, but with these attributes that God freely puts in our grasp we can stand firm against the rushing waters and the rising tides. We can stand firm against that diagnosis, or that performance review, we can stand firm against a marriage that feels like it’s crashing against the rocks, or a family member that refuses to be reconciled with you. God offers us armor to help us stand firm.

In 1873 a young Belgian Missionary Priest named Father Damien begged the Bishop of the Hawaiian Islands to send him to a leper colony on nearby Molakai. The Hawaiian Government exiled all its lepers there to isolate them from the rest of the population while they slowly died. Father Damien joined this group of exiles, and with the help of a few strong individuals there he built homes, an aqueduct, schools, a church, a hospital.

In a letter to his brother at home he expressed a sense of concern that many of the tasks of his ministry to them required contact with, as he said, “raw wounds.” Eleven years after joining the Molokai leper colony, Father Damien addressed his congregation one Sunday morning by saying “We Lepers.” In his efforts to serve this group of outcast human beings he had himself become one of them.

In the same year Damien began serving the Lepers Norwegian Doctor Armauer Hansen discovered that Leprosy was caused by a bacterium which 95% of the human population is naturally immune to.

Where did Father Damien get the strength to stand firm with the lepers of Molokai, who in the eyes of the world were outcasts and without hope? From within, from God, from realizing that

strength is cultivated in loss as much as it is in victory. Jesus said the kingdom of God is within you, and that means all that power God possesses is ours as well.

At the beginning I encouraged you this week to think about what river you might be crossing right now and where you might need extra courage. Is it a cross into a new phase of life? Is it a cross from a place of comfort to a place of uncertainty? Is it a cross from despair to hopefulness, or the other way around? Is it a cross into victory? Is a cross into defeat?

Whatever it is, it is *THE* cross of Christ where we go from strength to strength, because it was there where despair and hopelessness are radically transformed into brilliant bright Morningstar hope. It's there where we renew our strength. Will you pray with me?