

Standing in the Gap  
Joshua 3  
Rev. Jonathan Cornell  
5-10-20

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Again, good morning. Welcome to worship here at Wabash Presbyterian, my name is Jonathan Cornell, and if you are joining us online today—watching our YouTube video or perhaps you are tuning in on the radio in your home or in your car. In whatever way you have found yourself with us this morning I want to greet you and thank you for taking the time to be with us today to listen to and attend to God’s Word.

It’s become something of a refrain over the last several weeks but this is really is a unique time in our lives. And to mark this time, we have been looking at the Old Testament book of Joshua to give us something of an orienting story to perhaps help us make sense—or at least give us a frame of reference this journey we have been on in a time of a global pandemic.

Regardless of what these last few weeks have meant for you, it seems that there are some consistent themes that are true of all of us in this time. First is that we’re all in this together. I love the campaign that Christine Flohr and her team at the Wabash County Visitors Bureau have adopted for this season, that We are Better Together. Isolation, fear, and mistrust are the best tools for disrupting and disorienting us from one another. But we have this chance to see that together we are better when we take care of one another.

Second, where we’re standing now is in something of a liminal space. And what I mean by that is we’ve left one space, and we’re moving into a new space but we’re not quite there yet—so we’re sort of in between two places. We’re in tension, we’re in a place of liminality. And the truth is that, though at first it may seem strange or even scary, it’s actually an opportunity to stop and reflect and see God’s word and actions at work among us.

Those of you who know me know that I am a huge fan of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, a few times a year I will either sit down in 30-40 min segments and watch the films, or other times just pull out the hardback book Amy gave me one Christmas and just let the pages fall open and read a chapter or two. But there’s a moment in the first Film the Fellowship of the Ring where Sam and Frodo have departed the shire with the ring and have begun their quest. And as they’re walking through the fields in the outer-reaches of the Shire, Sam stops and he says: “This is it. If I take one more step, it’ll be the farthest from home I’ve ever been.” And then he takes one step, then another, then another. “Remember what Bilbo used to say, it’s a dangerous business, going out your door, step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, you never know where you might be swept off to.”

The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians that because Christ Jesus has made Paul his own, he considers one thing, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead (Philippians 3:12-13).

For the last few weeks we have been reading through the first few chapters in the book of Joshua, in a series I’ve called Crossing Life’s Rivers With God. And today we finally make it

to the river, the people of Israel—God’s chosen—are about to finally take that first step out into the unknown currents of a new life of trusting God.

You see 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

In the words of a song by one of my favorite bands, U2 (who I’ve mentioned on a few occasions lately)

I have climbed the highest mountain,  
I have run through the fields.  
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.

We live in that place in between the wilderness and the Promised Land. We have received all in the life from God’s hand and yet there is still that which awaits us, what which is—for now—beyond our reach the resolution, the consummation, the Promised Land. God’s fulfilled Kingdom. This morning I would invite you to join me once again as we turn to the book of Joshua. Today we’ll be reading from Joshua chapter 3, when I’m done reading I’ll say this is the word of the Lord so that if you believe it you can respond by saying thanks be to God. Listen carefully we’re reading God’s Holy Word.

**1 Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim, with all the people of Israel; and they came to the Jordan, and lodged there before they passed over. 2 At the end of three days (remember, in the bible the best things happen after three days.) the officers went through the camp 3 and commanded the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it, 4 that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come near it." 5 And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." 6 And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and pass on before the people." And they took up the Ark of the Covenant, and went before the people. 7 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. 8 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.'" 13 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." 14 So, when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), 16 the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off. 17 And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

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.*

Well the first thing that Joshua and the Israelites were required to do is pause for a time to allow the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant to go before them. It says that they are to allow for a distance of 2,000 cubits to be between them—in other words, they are to have a broad, expansive perspective. God doesn't want them to lose the forest from the trees.

In life our vision of what is going on and what is required next can become so narrowly focused that we lose sight of God's activity that may not be taking place right here (in front of our nose), but it may be taking place over here. I have some friends who one time were looking for a home, and the home they found—which they thought was perfect for them, was, through some shady practices, sold out from under them to another buyer. And so instead they went with another choice on the same block, but not the home they really wanted. But what they didn't know about the home was that because of some modifications that had been made to the attic space, it had closed off its ventilation to the roof—which in time would have compromised the strength and stability of the roof over their heads. Perhaps they were being preserved from an unstable, even dangerous roof that would one day be a major repair expense. But the only way they can see that is if they stand back and look out ahead at what God is doing before them.

In the book of Exodus, Moses having led God's people out of Egypt brought them to the Red Sea, only to see Pharaoh's army bearing down on them. And understandably the people begin to freak out, because all they can see is the water before them, and the army behind them. Two hopeless options. But Moses says to them **“Stand firm and see, look to the horizon, see the big picture, the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, you have only to be silent”** (Exodus 14:13-14).

When Joshua says keep a distance, it's because this road is new to them, and if they only focus on its newness, and not on the God who is going before them they will cave to fear and doubt.

The first lesson in crossing the threshold into new territory is look to the horizon, look to the broad view, there we might possibly see the God who is at work around and before us. It also reminds us that as we walk, we walk as those who are following the lead of God, we're walking in faith, the choice to believe that God's activity and work is already taking place beyond our reach, and faith is the choice to believe in that activity.

Then when it was time to move the Priests were to step forward into the river, that wild and unpredictable place. Unlike some of the other culture of the time, like the Egyptians and the Nile or the Ganges in India, the Jordan River was not a sacred thing. What it was, however, was a barrier, 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 the dry familiarity of the wilderness.

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.

Story of stepping out into the water...  
Making a transition to Montessori school

We're facing the question right now of how to proceed forward with the ministry of our church to children and youth. Kari served phenomenally to help lead us to this place, and now she is handing the baton to us for the next leg of the race.

But as 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, take note and a mental image of this moment in between the wilderness and the Promised Land, with the water of the river piled up on either side of you, because this is an important metaphor for where you 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. Either they're already in the Promised Land, and they live in a bubble, their lives are contained and safe. Then when bad things happen in the world they tend to ignore them and continue in their little Promised Land bubble. The other group are those who wallow in the wilderness, transfixed on the problem or pain and either unable or unwilling to see that God may be doing a new thing.

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, (sing). 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?

Finally, 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. The Bible is filled with people who for whatever reason find themselves in the wilderness, Noah, out on the Ark during the flood, Moses and the Israelites in the Desert, David when he's fleeing from King Saul. But the most important and my favorite is the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert by the evil one. Time and again the devil says 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? 3 short words: **Be gone Satan.** Jesus leans out of the wilderness, and into trust, into the faith that he is given.

And when we lean into the Promised Land we also reach for it as well. Like an Olympic sprinter or swimmer, who reach for the finish, reach for that wall. We also reach for the finish. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Philippians 3:13-14: **Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

Finally, when we think of the place between the wilderness and the Promised Land, the most important and basic example of this for our faith is the Cross of Calvary. There Jesus who was crucified for the forgiveness of our sins, experienced the deepest darkness of wilderness anyone could ever know. When Jesus said: **My God my God why have you forsaken me,** he felt the darkness of abandonment, but then in the very next breath Jesus reaches with the arms of faith for the Promised Land saying, **Father into your hands I commit my spirit.**

I don't know where you are this morning, maybe you are a little too much in the wilderness—in which case I encourage you to reach forward for the Promised Land. Or perhaps you're living in the bubble of your own little Promised Land, in which case maybe you need to reach back into the wilderness perhaps of someone else's life. Whatever the case, it's when we stand in the middle of the river that we see most clearly God's kingdom this side of heaven. Amen