

“YOU HAVE NOT PASSED THIS WAY BEFORE”

1-06-08
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Joshua 3:1-17

TEXT: ... *that you may know the way you shall go,*

INTRODUCTION

This last week, a parishioner told me about hearing Art Linkletter relate a conversation he had in his home with Phyllis Diller. Phyllis asked Art, “Do you know how to make God laugh?” Art responded with, “Well, certainly not. How can anyone know that?” Phyllis said, “Just tell Him your plans!”

On this first Sunday of a new year, I can’t help but reflect on what’s ahead. Yet, the reality is, as Proverbs tells us, (19:21)

*Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*

Certainly we need to enter every day with humility, knowing our plans are not final, relinquishing everything to the Lord’s purposes. But, the beginning of a new year has a way of highlighting this truth for us.

You may recall in The Fellowship of the Ring, the first movie in The Lord of the Rings trilogy, based on Tolkien’s books, Frodo and Sam are about to leave their beloved shire with its familiar steams, valleys, meadows, and forests. They are on a perilous journey that will take them to the ends of the earth, though they don’t yet know that— yet it is a journey into the unknown. As they cross a field, Sam stops dead in his tracks. Seeing this, Frodo stops as well.

“What’s the matter, Sam?”

“If I take one more step,” Sam says, “I’ll have gone further than I’ve been before.”

Frodo smiles, walks back to him, puts his arm around him saying,

“As Gandalf says, it’s a dangerous thing, just going out your door.”

Sam, with his practical wisdom, has the sense to pause and reflect before the unknown.

There is a humility and respect here that we should also be sensitized to. Every day we enter into a world of unknowns. We too need to stop in our tracks before we rush into any day. We do that through a devotional time with prayer and God’s Word, committing ourselves and the day into His hands. Yes, it can be intimidating if we think seriously about what may lie ahead that we don’t even imagine. But, in our text this morning, God gives us what we need to know so that we don’t just push on thoughtlessly on our own, but approach each day of this year with a proper sense of humility and trust. It also gives some very practical steps we need to take in order to do this.

For my Old Testament devotional reading a week ago, I began in the book of Joshua. I got rather

excited about truths I was seeing in the first six chapters, and how fitting they seem as we enter this year. So, through the first Sunday in Feb., I plan to be preaching from these chapters. They are appropriate because they involve preparation for entering into the promised land. The nation of Israel has been on a 40 year journey after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Now, finally, they are ready to move into the land God has promised them– but, it is not an empty land. It is inhabited by the Canaanites living in fortified, walled cities. In fact, seven nations of people are listed. How is this going to happen? But, even before that, there is a large river to cross– the Jordan.

I'm beginning with the 3rd chapter, since it contains that thematic phrase that fits for all these sermons, *for you have not passed this way before*. Then next week, we'll backtrack and look at the kind of people God calls us to be to make the kind of conquests He calls us to.

READ: Joshua 3

I want to highlight three principles here as we move into a new year:

1. Follow God
2. Consecrate Yourself
3. Step Out

FOLLOW GOD

The “ark of the covenant” is the centerpiece of the instructions on crossing the river Jordan. It is mentioned 11 times in the 17 verses of this chapter. The command is:

"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. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. (Josh 3:3-4)

Follow the ark. The ark of the covenant was Israel's most sacred possession. [Here's a picture] It was a rectangular, gold box with two cherubim on top facing each other– suggesting the invisible God seated on a throne between them. So the ark is the symbol of God's presence.

So, God is in unmistakable terms telling them to go where God is going– follow Him. And that applies to us as well. He is going before you. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfect love. That is our confidence. We don't have to know the future or fear the future. God is already there ahead of us, making the way for us through whatever might be. There is a good saying often used by believers, “In what God guides, He provides.” What is there to be concerned about as long as we are following Him?

At the beginning of the Exodus, Israel faced the impossibility of crossing the Red Sea with Pharaoh's troops right behind them. But God parted the waters and they went through on dry land. Now, at the end of their wilderness journey there is another body of water impossible to cross preventing their entrance into the land promised– the mighty Jordan river at flood stage. But as long as they follow God, He will make a way.

Here is what I consider one of the most basic lessons of the spiritual life. It requires humility on

our part to stop and seek God, waiting for what He desires when He desires it. It is one I need to keep learning over and over again– “Don’t rush ahead or decide you know the way.” As Ps. 105:4 says so well,

Seek the Lord and His strength;

Seek His presence continuously.

I wrote that verse down this week and stuck it in my day-timer– on the marker that marks the day so it moves with me each day– a constant reminder.

If you’re a guy it’s almost certain that at sometime you’ve decided you know the way and refused to ask for directions. There seems to be something genetic in us that says we should always know where we are and how to get to where we want to be. To admit we don’t know is for some reason humbling to the male species. The problem I have with Polly is, she always wants to stop and ask for directions before we are lost. And, it becomes a delicate point in my coming to the conclusion we are lost– we just can’t agree sometimes on that point.

But all of us are guilty of this in terms of living our lives. We figure we know how to approach each day, make our decisions, raise our families, do our jobs, etc. James in his hard-hitting fashion brings us all up short:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

(James 4:13-15)

Humbly submit all your thoughts and plans to God. Follow Him into each day and each event.

Contained within the ark were three items, also suggestive of what it means to follow God: the tablets of the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God on Mt. Sinai; Aaron’s staff with which the miraculous deliverance from Egypt was accomplished; and a jar of manna, God’s provision of food in the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. With the staff, Israel was led– the way. With the tablets of law, they learned God’s ways, truth to live by. And the manna sustained their lives– the life. Jesus said, *I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life* (Jn. 14:6). I’m sure there is no accident in that parallel. Follow Jesus.

BE CONSECRATED

Follow, but not too close! Don’t get too familiar with that which is holy. The Israelites were to follow at a respectful distance, staying about 1000 yards back. No one was to touch the ark, not even the priests. Thus it was carried on long poles. Only the priests, those consecrated to the service of the Lord, were to bear the ark on the poles. There is separation here which is a message we also need to hear.

Through the Old Testament, the separateness of God and the incompatibility of His holiness with sinful humanity is stressed. With God coming to us in Jesus, that has changed. There can be an intimacy with God, in fact, when our sins are forgiven and we make Jesus Lord of our lives, God’s Spirit takes up residence in our bodies. We rightly sing, “What a Friend we have in Jesus.”

BUT, in this text we have a caution to not carry that into presumption. Jesus is our friend, but not our buddy. I've talked about the Biblical idea of "the fear-of-the-Lord" a number of times recently. This does not mean Christians are to live in terror of God— but stand in awe and respect of Him. The expression, "familiarity breeds contempt" is applicable. If we are not in awe of God, duly humbled before Him, we soon begin disregarding Him and making our own way.

In our day, way too much respect is being lost for authority and for those that should be honored. We want to pull everyone down to our level, or beneath us. It carries over to God. It breaks the 3rd Commandment of not taking the Lord's name in vain. That also includes, emptying God's name of its meaning and essence. We need to be careful, respectful, honoring of The Name. To emphasize this, there is a multiplying of names here. First it is "the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God" (3) and moves to "the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth" (11).

In keeping with this is the command in vs. 5, *Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.* "Sanctify" can be "consecrate" or "purify." Because of what God is going to do, we need to prepare ourselves, and that preparation involves separating ourselves from sin, from disobedience, and anything displeasing to a holy God. Whenever there is a true move of God, I believe there will be big-time confession of sin and repentance. The history of revivals verifies this. In the Book of Acts, where God is doing such great wonders, again and again the apostles are calling people to repentance. I was struck the other morning in my reading by Peter's sermon after the healing the beggar at the Beautiful Gate, *Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord....* (Acts 3:19-20). I underline that last half because of the question it brought to my mind. "When I am lacking times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, could it be because of my half-hearted, incomplete, superficial repentance?" I do know that when I come to God with no-holds-barred repentance, there is inevitably a wonderful refreshing presence from Him.

STEPPING OUT

Here is a final principle for our new year: the soles of the feet of the priests had to rest in the waters before the Jordan was cut off. They could have stood on the banks all day and many days waiting for the water to dry up. Faith is stepping into the impossible, the raging flood waters. Yes, getting out of the boat as we studied in our fall adult class. But, as the feet of the priests, bearing the presence of God dipped in the edge of the water, the waters stood in a single heap at a place called Adam, 18 mi. north of where they were crossing.

Because of the geography mentioned, it is speculated that this may have been a miracle of timing. In the area mentioned, the Jordan (especially at flood stage) can undermine steep cliffs which can collapse, blocking the river. Such an event happened in 1927, blocking the river for 20 hrs. If this is how God did it, it is still awesome. How long would it take water to flow 18 mi.? This is not a fast moving river. Even if it is flowing 6 mph, the landside had to happen 3 hr. earlier. Such a timing so that at the moment the priests feet entered the river, it stopped is something only God could pull off. And, then, returning to its regular flow the moment everyone is across and the ark back on dry land is the second half fo this miracle.

Here is a Biblical principle. Faith involves acting based upon the Word of the Lord. It doesn't

mean waiting for the feeling first or the miracle first, then stepping out. Imagine how those priests felt. “We can look foolish here... how many steps in?” Think of Moses stretching out his staff over the Red Sea before it parts. That looks silly if nothing happens. Think of the miracles Jesus did: the feeding of 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish; to the lepers “go have the priests examine you”; to the blind man, “go wash in the pool of Siloam;” at the wedding when the wine ran out, “go fill the jars with water” And, in the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate I mentioned a moment ago from Acts,

Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. (Acts 3:6-7)

It is *as* he is pulled up by Peter the man's ankles are healed.

One note of caution. We must not be presumptuous. We need to learn to listen and discern what God is saying. But then, step out or in as the case may be. Open your mouth and begin to speak—don't worry ahead of time what you should say in that witness. Go ahead and pray for healing. Step out and give as the Lord has directed. In the stepping out, the miracle comes.

CONCLUSION

These stories of the entrance into the promised land are carefully told because they form a strong metaphor of our Christian pilgrimage believers have recognized throughout history. This new year is the promised land for each of us. Let's all be sure we are following where God leads, consecrating ourselves to Him, and then acting on what He tells us to do. We will not be disappointed. Otherwise, we'll be stuck on the other side of the Jordan.

What Jordan river are you facing? Have you gotten ahead of God or just moved off on your own way? Are you hanging on to something displeasing to the Lord? Is God asking you to make the next step, but you're holding back? Talk it over with Him as you come to the Lord's Table this morning.