

Ruth McCowan
October 30, 2011

Scripture: Joshua 3: 7-17; Matthew 23: 1-12

In our reading this morning from Joshua you can almost feel the excitement. So much has happened before the people of Israel had reached this moment. 40 years ago they were freed from slavery in Egypt and their journey through the wilderness has brought them here...to the promised land flowing with milk and honey, the land that God had promised to them.

We have to realize though that these are not the same people that left Egypt. The people who began this journey all died in the wilderness. The ones who are standing on the banks of the Jordan in our reading today are their sons and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons.

And even though they are different people, they are still facing the same thing as their ancestors did a generation ago. Like their parents and grandparents, they are being confronted with crossing the water. In order to get to the Promised Land, they have to cross the Jordan River which is flowing strong from the rains of the harvest season. My husband and I have just returned from a trip to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and while we were in Nova Scotia we had one day of torrential rain like I have not seen in a long time. Actually, as we were returning home from a day of rain, the river banks had rose so much that the river had come up over the road and it was very treacherous. The next day, the sun came out and the river started to recede. Two days after the big rain as went down to the village and seeing the river, I commented to my cousin, "the river looks angry" and the current was so strong. This was the same type of river that greeted the Israelite people as they approached the Promised Land.

It is difficult to read about this scene at the Jordan River without recalling the beginning of the Exodus, when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea to safety. Forty years later, the Israelite people are confronted with water again and they know that the only way that they will be able to cross it is with a miracle.

Believe me, if someone told me a couple of weeks ago that I had to cross the St. Mary's River, the "angry" river that I saw, I would say they were crazy. It would be humanly impossible but there is a miracle in this story when God intervenes once again.

Joshua, the new leader of the people, is told to have the priests pick up the Ark of the Covenant which contains the tablets of the Ten Commandments and to wade into the "angry" river. When they obey, the Jordan stops flowing, dammed upstream so that the ground dries up where the waters used to flow. As long as the priests stand in the river bed, the waters stop flowing. But, when all of the people are across and the priest ascend the opposite bank into the Promised Land, the waters resume their course, and once again, rage towards the Dead Sea.

I think one of the most significant parts of this story is when the priests had to have the faith to put their feet into the raging river. It is only when the soles of the feet of those bearing the ark touch the water that the waters part. Not before.

There may be many times in our lives that we may feel like we have been walking around in the wilderness and like the Israelites we may come across a barrier between us and the Promised Land and we are called to take that leap of faith, to make a movement towards the Promised Land. We are called to cross the river, to enter the turbulent and muddy flood waters so that we can receive the fullness of what God has promised to us and to those who follow us. This is no easy matter. Being called forward can be very frightening. We don't know what will happen and the timing can

feel all wrong. Often things might even be at their worst instead of being at their best. Not only can we not see the bottom of the river but we may not even be able to tell where the banks of the river are but when we step out in faith, like the people of Israel, we are not alone. We have God with us and as we trust in God presence even when the circumstances don't look good at all, the waters will part.

This story in Joshua tells us that God goes before us into the flood waters of life. God stands in the middle of the waters and God divides them, and then God watches us pass safely to the other side. It tells us that when we come to a difficult stretch on the road to recovery, when we encounter obstacles and hazards in our attempt to be better people, when we come across barriers to living as God calls us to live, then we need to hold God up for all to see in the midst of those troubles, we need to claim God's presence in the centre of the turmoil and trust in God to keep us perfectly safe and deliver us though to the other side.

In our Gospel reading this morning we are reminded that its not about us, its not about the outward show but its about what God is doing through us. Jesus uses the Pharisees as his example of how they have got it all wrong. To the world the Pharisees would have been an example of piety and purity.

They took the Torah seriously, so seriously that they committed their lives to itemizing and analyzing every possible interaction there might be between daily life and the laws of Moses. They labored to inject spiritual meaning into all everyday actions. The Pharisees insisted that the Sabbath be as separated as possible from the rest of the "work week." They carefully calculated and itemized tithes for all sorts of holy and helpful reasons. On the outside the Pharisees sounded pretty good but Jesus singles them out as an example of bad faith. By taking the best intentions, the best qualities of piety and purity they turned it into nitpicking legalism and their pride overcame their piety.

The Pharisees embodied what we see so often in the world – the desire to be "large and in charge." Recognized. Celebrated. Honored. Given the best seat; the best titles and special status at gatherings. The Pharisees believed they were the "leaders" within first-century Judaism. They were the head and the heart of Judaism's faithful future.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus challenges our understanding of what a church leader is. Jesus did not call for great leaders. In fact, Jesus specifically rejects any special designations among his disciples. There are to be no "rabbis," no "fathers," no "instructors." Instead Jesus calls for a community of what? Of "servants," of the "humble." Jesus called disciples. And there was only one main qualification for becoming disciples: "Follow me."

Not lead. Follow. Not "go into all the world and make leaders" but "go into all the world and make disciples."

Tomorrow is Halloween and the big question is "what are you going to be"? It is the same question Jesus is posing to his disciples and the other temple crowd listeners in today's gospel. What will you be? Will you need to define yourself according to human measures? Or will you choose to be . . . a follower, a servant ?

John Buchanan is currently the Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, as well as editor of *The Christian Century* magazine. In the early days of his ministry, when he served one summer as pastor of a small parish church in Kinlochleven, a village in the Western Highlands of Scotland, the Church of Scotland

minister in the neighboring parish, Johnny Dunlop, reached out to him in friendship. Dr. Buchanan tells this story:

He came to see me. We sat in the little manse study, had a cup of coffee and good long conversation. The next Sunday was Communion Sunday, and Johnny told me a story he said he recalled every time he presided at the Lord's Table and a story I remember every time I am privileged to stand behind the Lord's Table and break the bread and share the cup.

Johnny was in the infantry in the British Army in World War II. His unit was surrounded, and he was captured and ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Poland. It was dreadful: cold, wet, filthy, and worst of all, there was almost no food, just a bowl of thin soup and a scrap of bread once a day. Prisoners lost weight, until they were skin and bones, contracted diseases, and began to die. The war was not going very well for the Allies, and there didn't seem to be any reason for hope. As the tide began to turn and Germany's fortunes diminished, the conditions in the prisoner of war camp became worse, until some prisoners didn't want to go on living. One easy way to end it all, he told me, was to throw yourself against the barbed wire fence as if trying to escape and be shot instantly by the guards. Johnny said that one night, deeply discouraged, depressed, and sick with despair and hunger, he slipped out of the barracks and walked toward the fence, not quite sure whether he ought simply to end it all. He sat down on the bare ground thinking. He sensed movement in the dark on the other side of the barbed wire. It was a Polish farmer. He had half a potato in his hand. He thrust the potato through the barbed wire. As Johnny Dunlop took it, the man said, in heavily accented English, "The Body of Christ." (John Buchanan, "In Remembrance of Him," 02 October 2011, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois)

That's the ritual act of a follower of Jesus thrusting the body of Christ into this world where it needs Christ's body the most.

Let us pray:

Loving God, Be with us today wherever we are our journey. Help us to put our feet in the water and to have faith. Help us to follow you, to be who you need us to be in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.