

•We Have to Get our Feet Wet
Joshua 3:1-17
Farmville Baptist Church
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This morning we are going to join the Israelites as they finally cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But before we do that, let's remember all that occurred that brought them to this point – it's a roller coast ride of successes and failures. Last fall we spent a good bit of time in the book of Exodus, following the Israelites as God, through the pillars of fire and cloud, led them out of Egypt. It was a miraculous event and the people were in awe until they found themselves backed up against the Red Sea with the Egyptian Army in full pursuit. All of the sudden, the people were terrified, and they cried out to the Lord and complained to Moses. •Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die out here.ö But Moses said, •Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians you see today you shall never see again.ö Then God instructed Moses to hold out his hand and lift up his staff; God divided the Sea and the Israelites walked across on dry ground. And what happened when the Egyptians followed them into the seabed? The water rushed over them and they drowned in the sea.

These mighty displays of God's power should have ensured Israel's faithfulness forever, shouldn't it? But it didn't. Just three days later they complained about lack of water – so God turned the bitter river water sweet. Next they complained about no food, and God miraculously provided quail and manna from heaven.

A few months later the Israelites reach Sinai and Moses ascends the mountain to meet with God and receive the ten commandments. But while Moses is delayed on the mountain, the

people get restless, and what do they do? They ask Aaron to make to make them a god ó so they take their gold and melt it down and Aaron makes them a golden calf to worship. God is so angry that God threatens to consume them all until Moses pleads with God to change God's mind.

As time passes, the people build the Ark of the Covenant, and the presence of God dwells with them there. A bit later, God commands Moses to send 12 spies into Canaan -one from each tribe ó to survey the land. After 40 days they return to the Israelite camp with a mixed report: the land flows with milk and honey, they say, but the people are strong and the cities are fortified, and we will never prevail against them. Only Joshua and Caleb believe the mission is possible. So, the Israelites rebel once again and decide to choose a captain and go back to Egypt. Once again, God threatens to disinherit them and start again with a new people, and once again Moses pleads with God not to follow through. God relents again, but with consequences this time. "No one who has seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness and yet tested me these 10 times and not obeyed my voice shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors shall see it. None except Caleb who has followed me wholeheartedly." So for 40 years, Israel wanders in the wilderness until the old generation passes away and Joshua is appointed as Moses's successor. Hear the beginning of the book of Joshua:

After Moses dies and is buried in the land of Moab, the Lord speaks to Joshua, "Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them" to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful

wherever you go. ⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.ö

Three times in these 9 verses, God challenges Joshua to be strong and courageous ó it makes you wonder exactly what he will be facing doesn't it? God also reminds Joshua, and Israel, to keep the law and commandments ever in front of them, meditating on it day and night so that they will be careful to follow it.

When so many things clamor for our attention and when it is easy to get sucked into the 24 hour news cycle and social media, this reminder to stay grounded in God's word is as relevant today as ever.

Back in our story, Joshua immediately begins preparing the people. He sends just 2 spies into the land this time, and they return with a much more favorable report, bringing us to today's text. As we join the story, the Israelites have been camping by the Jordan River for three days. At the end of that time, at Joshua's instruction, the officers go through the camp and command the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the priests, you will know it is time. FOLLOW IT, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.

These first four verses already give us some important lessons. First, like the Exodus, this crossing is one that will be led by God. Back in Egypt, God led the Israelites with the pillar of cloud and smoke. This time, the Ark of the Covenant, will symbolize and embody God's guiding presence. Remember that the Ark of the Covenant carried the ten commandments ó it is

the holy of holies to Israel before they built the Temple. Only the Levitical priests are to touch it ó if lay persons do, they will die. In fact, in today's story, Israel is warned to give the ark a wide berth to protect themselves. But God is with them, and will be leading the way, just as God always has.

Second, the people are reminded to follow the ark because they have not been this way before. This seems obvious doesn't it? But given Israel's roller coaster history and their familiarity with the river, it's a good word. It's a good word for us too. As we prepare to step into a new chapter in our lives as a congregation, we need to be sure that we are following God closely. We need to be careful that we don't think we know all the answers or think we can go our own way and do as we please. Will we do a new thing? Yes, but it needs to be with God's clear direction.

All of this sounds well and good doesn't it, and then Israel gets to the bank of the river. It is harvest time, the text tells us, and the Jordan is overflowing its banks ó it's flooding. We've seen plenty of images of that this week haven't we? Some scholars estimate that the river was up to 2/3 of a mile across at this point and flowing fast, up to 40-miles an hour. What is more, the plain that surrounds this river is packed with tangled brush and dense growth. . How will a whole nation get through the thickets and cross the river? How will they protect the children and the animals, much less all of their household goods from being swept away?

Once again, God provides the way. As the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant step into the water, the Jordan River parts, just as the Red Sea had done a generation ago. And just as their ancestors had done a generation ago, the Israelites walk across on dry ground. Chapter four tells us they went in haste ó I wouldn't want tarry either would you ó but the whole nation

crosses over. Once they are all safely on the other side, Joshua commands the priests carrying the ark to come out of the river bed, and after they do, the Jordan flows, and overflows, once again.

As a way to mark the significance of this day, God tells Joshua \acute{o} before the priests leave the river bed, \tilde{o} choose one man from each tribe and command them each to take a stone from the river bed. \ddot{o} These stones are then stacked into a lasting reminder of what God did that day and a reminder of the future that lay ahead of them. Joshua tells the Israelites, \tilde{o} When your children ask their parents in times to come, $\text{-What do these stones mean?}$ ϕ Then you shall let your children know, $\text{-Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may revere the Lord your God forever.}$ \ddot{o}

Friends, I believe that God is preparing to lead Farmville Baptist into a new and exciting future. Like Israel, we have had our ups and downs, but we ϕ ve been waiting, and praying, and God has been listening. I hope as the bright new future unfolds, that you will mark these days carefully, so that in days to come you can tell your children and your children ϕ s children about what God did in this place, and so that all the people of the earth may know the God who will continue to lead and deliver you.

But before that happens, I want us to notice one more thing about today ϕ s story. God was ready to do an amazing thing for the Israelites, but they had to put their trust in God first. When did the Jordan River part for the people to cross? Not early in the story. They didn ϕ t get to see the river part and then choose to walk across. When did the river part? As the priests were walking into it carrying the ark. It wasn ϕ t until they stepped out in faith and trust that God made a way.

We have waited, and we have prayed, we have scoped out the land and visioned a new future. It won't be long until it's time to get our feet wet. Are you ready?