

“Crossing Over to New Life”

November 16, 2014

Ancestors in Faith series

When we went to Croatia this summer, we stayed on the Adriatic coast. The city of Zadar is actually on a peninsula, and there’s one walking bridge that connects the old and new parts of the city. It was our normal practice to walk across the bridge, but one day we decided on a different option - taking a very small boat to get across the channel.

When I say “very small,” I mean very small. The man with the oars crowded us on, but not without some hesitancy on my part. This small boat didn’t have a long way to go, but there were many bigger boats in the same area. The man with the oars had to navigate carefully. It’s a trip he’s made many times in a day over many days in a year, but I was still uncertain.

Of course, we made it safely to the other side. A short journey, but one that I thought of as I encountered this passage. “Crossing over” - at the beginning of their journey out of Egypt when God led them to freedom through the sea with Moses as leader and now into the Promised Land where God leads them across with Joshua in the lead.

Maybe you’ve already noticed something about the story of our ancestors in faith. We talked about how important the journey is - that Moses’ relationship with God through his life was so important for him as a leader. But the journey is a powerful metaphor for a life of faith. From slavery in Egypt to freedom from Pharaoh’s control, then from wandering in the wilderness to the assurance that they are God’s people - that God wants to make a covenant with them and lead them to the Promised Land. There are ups and downs along the way, of course - times when they felt close to God and times when God seemed far off. Finally, they come to the land God promised. And they cross over at God’s leading with Joshua offering the assurance that God will be with them.

So can we see ourselves in it? God is our Creator, and yet we struggle to know that and claim that truth deeply. We rely on ourselves. We become wrapped up in our own stuff. We’re slaves to our selfishness and greed, pride, and temptation. We’re so caught up in striving after what we want that we can’t see beyond it. We’re in a wilderness of our own making.

Even so, God offers us freedom from the worst of ourselves. God's love and faithfulness extend far beyond what we can imagine - and even so much farther beyond what we offer to one another. Can you imagine if we treated each other like God treated the Israelites?

That's what I've focused on with Moses and Joshua and the Israelites. They have never been alone - even in the midst of their whining in the wilderness, turning away from God, and worshipping idols, God has never left them or turned from them. Yes, there were difficult moments, but they've never been without God's presence and God's love.

That's what so amazing. We can't earn this gift! We don't deserve it. It's simply there for us to receive. And when we accept it, that's not the end of the journey! The journey of faith continues all through our lives. Some of us accepted the gift of salvation long ago. We gave our lives to Christ, but that doesn't mean we haven't struggled since! We're still caught up in greed and pride and wanting to go our own way. We're tempted to get off track. Faith really is a daily practice. It's a gift of God, but it takes work on our part, too.

If you're wondering what it means to give your heart to Christ, if you're seeking that relationship, this image of crossing over the river might help. Again, consider that the Israelites had been wandering and walking with God - led by Moses - for 40 years! The promise of a land that God would give them was what kept them going. This land where they could worship God fully. This land where they would have everything they needed and had hoped for. This kept them going along with Moses' deep conviction that God would make good of that promise.

To be sent into the Promised Land is a gift from God. However, the journey there wasn't without difficulty, conflict, struggle, and joy. And after coming to the Promised Land, it wasn't always easy. But Joshua invites them to listen first - to draw near and hear the word of the Lord.

If we stay with the metaphor of a journey of faith, this crossing over the Jordan River has become connected with baptism. When we're baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it is a moment of new life - no matter our age. We celebrate those moments of new life and hope, and they happen over and over again because we're on a journey. Baptism is an important step, but it's a beginning - not the end of a journey.

And each step is important. Joshua invites the people to take one step at a time. When the priests' feet go into the water, they watch and wait for God - not plunging in all the way, but trusting that God is at work. And living our faith is like that. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "You don't have to see the whole staircase; just take the first step." We can't see the full outcome of our faith. We don't know the twists and turns, but we can trust that God is faithful to walk with us.

When we've come to Christ after a long time of running away, when we overcome temptation, when we realize that worries and anxieties about the future don't have such a stronghold on us, we celebrate God's love and faithfulness. Just as the Ark of the Covenant (a symbol of God's law and leading) is the focus for the people as they cross the river, we pray that we focus on God, too - and God's faithfulness from the beginning up to now and in the days to come.

The opportunity to cross over the Jordan was a just that - an opportunity. And the Israelites had to keep on moving - not looking back at where they had come from, but instead looking at what was in front of them - the land that God had promised. We give thanks and move forward - not letting the past hold us back.

It was a blessing to serve dinner for our Family Promise guests this week. I felt good doing something. I felt good giving to people in need. But I want you to know that I also was challenged in a powerful way. One of the younger guests said "thank you" for the meal. And when he didn't think I heard him, he said "thank you" again. He wanted me to hear him. He wanted to make sure I knew it!

What a powerful reminder for me! How many times am I as grateful to God for life and hope as this person was for a simple meal of tacos? How many times do I stop and pray - and really want God to know how thankful I am? God is with us at every step of the journey we're walking with him, and we have the opportunity to say "thank you" and to reflect our gratitude in how we live.

A life of faith isn't a smooth road for any of us, and it's not always smooth as a community of faith. But we are a community brought together by God in the name of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. When Ana was baptized, the pastor who baptized her let her play in the water, and then she said, "Live in

God's grace." We live in God's grace every day. We live with the gift of new life and hope every day!

If you and I have experienced new life, then what do we do? Can we be just as passionate and excited about the Good News that God our Creator has never left us and will never leave us as we are about other stuff - sports, success, opportunities? Can we be just as forthcoming about who God is for us - about what God brought us through - as we are about everything else? Do our lives reflect how grateful we are for God's care and comfort?

Yesterday I witnessed a man who had lost his wife and was saying goodbye to her remind me and all who listened that the God who has walked with us still walks with us. He lifted up that verse of "Amazing Grace": *"When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we'd first begun."*

This crossing over shows that God is almighty, powerful, the One who saves. There is no doubt! So today, we remember who God is - the One who saves us, claims us, and gives us life. We remember who we are - God's people, called to show the world God's love and faithfulness. How will we do it? How will you go out and show and share a God who offers us? May we reflect the joy, peace, and hope of God who never leaves us or forsakes us. May we risk and share the Good News of God who does make a way, who does lead us faithfully, and who does bring us home in his heart?

Thanks be to God. Amen.