

October 7, 2018



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**Scripture Reading: Joshua 3.14 - 4-9**  
**The People enter into the Promised Land**

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people.

Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing towards the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

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, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, God said to Joshua:

‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, “Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.” ’

Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them,

‘Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever.’

The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.

**The Message: What stories do these stones tell?**

Let me tell you about the area. This is in Eastern Ontario, southwest of Napanee, near the shore of Hay Bay, which flows west into the Bay of Quinte.

Millenia ago, glaciers pulled back like fingers scratching at soil and rock, leaving behind north/south ridges of rich soil interspersed with strips of rocky rubble.

This is United Empire Loyalist territory. When the loyalist refugees came north, land distributors drew their lines north from lake Ontario, paralleling the fingers of the receding glaciers. As a result farms were either rich in deep loam or barely covered rock which meant those early families either prospered or starved. Each spring the first task was to gather the rocks that had erupted from the soil and pile them along the edges of the fields.

These stones tell a story of the land and its changes over millennia, hard manual labour, prosperity and technology, times of abundance and scarcity.

Today we recall the stories of the people of Israel who for three generations wandered, sometimes seemingly aimlessly, and often out of their way, in the wilderness.

The beginning and end of the Exile was marked by a distinct dampness. When the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt.

1. The parting of the waters of the Red Sea let them out of Egypt
2. The damming up of the waters of the Jordan River let them into the promised land.

These two bookends are a dramatic way of getting the attention of the people of Israel. God is with you. God is doing this.

However, after all those promises of freedom in the promised land, when the people of Israel finally get within sight of the promised land ... Moses is dead. He has taken his people out of Egypt, *all* the way through the wilderness for forty years, and then, just before they reach their destination, he dies.

But just when hope is about to give into despair, God says to Joshua, "I'm with *you* now, little buddy."

God told Joshua, 'choose twelve leaders', who were then to pick up the Ark of the Covenant, – they were to heft it up and step into the waters of the Jordan, at the height of spring flooding.

The Ark is

- the symbol of their faith,
- their relationship with God,
- and the 10 commandments that God gave them for good living.

It is a symbol of all their past --

- all the times that God has been with them,
- the law which provides their foundation
- All the ways in which God has spoken to the people.
- The Ark is also what makes possible their government and their identity as a people in the promised land.

It required bravery for the people to leave the wilderness – not as easy as we might think. In the wilderness, they began to grumble because they didn't have the comforts of Egypt. But by this part of the journey, the wilderness was the only life they knew. They grew up with the stories of their grandparents' bravery in crossing the Red Sea and now they faced as great a challenge.

But the leaders God gave them stood still, *in the middle of the river*, till everyone reached the other side.

- stood still while a miraculously dammed up river is overwhelming them on one side;
- stood still while the stubborn resisted and the stragglers lagged behind;
- stood still until every single person finally started to move and made it to the other side.

How frustrating for those leaders, standing still in the water, with the weight of the ark on their shoulders, waiting patiently for everyone to decide to forge ahead, take the risk, and cross that river.

It takes great courage to put a foot in the Jordan. But this story is told to encourage us to do just that.

It's our role as Christians, as members of Christ Church, today, to stand in the middle of the river, hefting the ark, our feet sinking into the mud, with swamp on one side, and a great pile of raging water on the other, until people cross over into the place that God has in mind for them.

This is a great church. I have seen it in the documents I have poured over and the people I have met. This church has met challenges to respond to the needs of the world, the needs of its neighbours, from Haiti to the children next door on Hallowe'en.

This is a time of challenge to our faith, to our sense of God's justice and mercy. With those ancient feet planted in the Jordan -- we are called to stick it out in the mud.

If the foundation of your faith is deep and secure, you can risk it all and step out.

The story doesn't end in the middle of the river. After all the people made it safely to the other side, the twelve leaders carrying the Ark finished the crossing. Their work was done. And then God told Joshua to choose another 12 leaders:

“one from each tribe, and command them, “Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.”

Why this pile of heavy rocks? 'So you can tell your children what happened and what I did for you.'

God was taking the present moment and turning it into a meaningful moment for the future.

When people were anxious, going through change, they could look at that pile of stones and remember the story, which would give them courage and hope. They could remember that there were times in the past when they took risks, and God saw them through safely; and that reassures them that God will continue to see them through.

Here you are, people of Christ Church, standing in your Jordan, telling the story.

This is your challenge. There are still stones to be added -- *the obvious ones and the ones you may have to dig deep for.*

A question we are challenged with today is,

'What will be the story stones that will give others a memory of your life of faith and your church?'

There are as many important stories as there have been members of this church.

- the story of one who, when the path was rocky, reminded you that it was faith, not finances, that would sustain you.
- the story of one who stepped forward to lead when others could not.
- the story of those who made big sacrifices for the sake of those who would come after *them*.

There is a story for every single member who has been a part of this community.

Today I want you to begin to think about your own stories:

What has been your best experience here?

(If you are a visitor, that will be today, when you joined a thankful people who are contemplating becoming a new creation.)

Today, on this day of thanksgiving, we give thanks for the people of Israel who lived through the exile, the leaders who carried the weight of the ark, the people who stepped into the Jordan and who piled up stones so that today we could give thanks for our faith in God who fulfilled all stories in Christ.