

Sermon #1,016: Joshua 3:9-17

3-31-13 (Easter Sunday: Resurrection of Our Lord), Bethany-Princeton MN

EASTER EXORDIUM

Today is a day for the whole world. You might think this is only a day for Christians. Even if there are Easter egg hunts, chocolate bunnies and Peeps, it isn't commercialized quite like Christmas, and for that we're somewhat thankful. It feels like we get to keep this more as *our* festival than Christmas, which the world has taken over and changed everyone's expectations not for the better.

But this is a day for the whole world to rejoice! – For the same reason Good Friday is a day for the whole world, only better. On Good Friday when Jesus died on the cross and said, **“It is finished!”** it meant He had paid for the sins of the world, every single person, whether they believe in Him or not. He didn't die only for those who believe in Him. His death atoned for everyone's sins.

But as Jesus lay in the tomb, it is as if all creation were waiting, holding its collective breath, to see if God would accept the payment. If Jesus did not rise, there would be no forgiveness – for anyone. But the angel's words **“He is risen!”** announce that there is peace between man and God. Everyone is forgiven of all sins. Jesus' resurrection proves it. The angel's words are the absolution of the whole world. Now they only need to believe it. Unfortunately many do not get the benefit of what Jesus has won for them, by their refusal to repent and believe.

But before we think how sad their lot is, let's think of ourselves. How sad, if we claim to believe in His resurrection and yet walk around just as fearful or discouraged as Jesus' followers before they saw Him risen from the dead. We must admit that we do this. But we also know what we need. We need to meet our risen Lord where He promises to meet us: in His Word and Sacraments. Once again He is meeting us there. In anticipation let us sing our festival verse:

Hymn #348 "He Is Arisen! Glorious Word"

CROSSING INTO THE PROMISED LAND

Prayer: By grace! Sin, death, and Satan hearken!

I bear my flag of faith in hand

And pass – for doubts my joy can't darken –

The Red Sea to the Promised Land.

I cling to what my Savior taught

And trust it, whether felt or not. (ELH #226 v. 10)

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, our risen Lord:

Standing at the brink of the Jordan River. Wondering if this deep, flowing river is going to sweep you into the great unknown. A nagging doubt presents itself: Can you trust this Joshua? Perhaps things weren't so bad in the wilderness.

It's no wonder that this scene at the Jordan River, with the Promised Land on the other side – so close but oh so far – has led people to compare this to the moment of death. "When I tread the verge of Jordan, / Bid my anxious fears subside," we sing in a hymn. In the spiritual, *Michael Row Your Boat Ashore*, which pictures the archangel Michael bringing people to heaven, two verses utilize this scene:

Jordan's River is deep and wide, Alleluia!

Milk and honey on the other side, Alleluia!

Jordan's River is chilly and cold, Alleluia!

Chills the body but not the soul, Alleluia!

Such thoughts help us visualize the fear and terror the Israelites undoubtedly felt. When we first hear "Jordan River" we might not get this. We picture the Jordan the way you see it in pictures of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, where they're only wading. It doesn't seem life-threatening. But here it says that at this time of year, the time of the spring harvest, "**the Jordan overflows all its banks.**"

It was a rushing river. It was deep. We think, Hadn't they been here before at the Red Sea, facing a passage through a large body of water? The short answer is: No. Remember, that generation died in the wilderness, all except Joshua and

Caleb. It is 40 years later. They are finally ready to enter Canaan. They are so close, and yet it feels so far away dwelling on their fears and doubts. Like us, they trust what they know. They knew Moses. He was the only leader they'd ever known. And no matter what they might have thought of the wilderness, it too is all they've ever known. At least they could feel the ground under their feet. They are facing God-knows-what now, with an untested, unproven leader.

This mirrors the way many people think about death. It's like you are with the Israelites at the edge of the Jordan, afraid you're about to be swept into the unknown. In spite of all that might be wrong or imperfect with this life – and judging from recent headlines, getting worse – still this life is what you know. I must admit I'd find it hard to be excited about being called to “cross over,” because I love my life and my loved ones so much. What lies ahead on the “other side” is unfamiliar. It seems so far away. We wonder what life is like there, we have more questions than answers, we've never set foot there but we know what this ground under our feet feels like. Maybe this wilderness isn't so bad.

This is what the fear of death can do. In the hymn we just sang it speaks of how death itself enslaves us to this fear and anxiety: “*Death ever grew more strong and bold/And kept us in its bondage*” (#343:2). This is how the devil makes use of death: to terrorize you. He gets you to dwell on all the thoughts about how death is a great unknown, puts all these unanswerable questions and nagging doubts foremost in your mind so that it hides the promises God has given you about what truly is the Promised Land, the home He has promised you as He promised Canaan to the patriarchs, and you conclude that it is just a dark and scary thing.

In other words, on the subject of death we rarely think like Christians. This is a heathen, pagan, uninformed attitude toward death. It leaves out faith because it leaves out Christ, which is just what the devil wants. On Easter Sunday

what we are really hearing, when we hear the words *"He is risen!"*, is that Christ went ahead of us into the valley of the shadow of death, and He came out alive.

That is what we are seeing even in this Old Testament story. For who is with the Israelites? Joshua. His name means "he will save." It's the same name as Jesus. In the Old Testament pronounced *Yehoshua*, and in the New Testament shortened to *Yeshua*, which is the name the angel told Joseph to give to Mary's Son – *"for He will save His people from their sins."* Joshua and Jesus are the same name. It's no coincidence. Joshua coming to the edge of the Jordan River with his frightened people is a preview of Jesus coming with all His frightened people – every person who ever lives – to the edge of a Jordan River that has the Promised Land on the other side. So many people think this Jordan moment is the moment of death, so chilly and cold, deep and wide.

But hold on. As much as we might want to peer into the tomb, that is not where Jesus, our Joshua, has brought us. Look at the next detail: the Jordan. When was it that Jesus put His feet into the Jordan? At His baptism. That is where Jesus, our Joshua, has brought us. Baptism, not death and the grave, is what this scene at the Jordan River in Joshua 3 is actually about.

All of these great miracles involving water, although they are true history and served a purpose for Israel on that day, were really preparing for baptism. The ark and the flood, the Red Sea, the water from the rock, and now crossing the Jordan. There they were, afraid of death and drowning. But suddenly, at the very moment that the priests bearing the ark of the covenant used God's Word according to His command, and dipped their feet into the Jordan, **"the [rushing] waters stood still, and rose in a heap very far away,"** and Joshua is careful to write that everyone, even the littlest of them, **"crossed over on dry ground,"** everyone, even the littlest of them, was saved by this miracle involving water.

This prepared for baptism in a beautiful way. In the sacrament of baptism we are to use water with God's Word according to His command, it is even for the littlest ones to be saved in this way. It is our Joshua, Jesus, who meets us at this water of baptism and leads us through. The heap of our sins are piled up high and the water of baptism covers and consumes all of it, our sins are washed "**very far away**" where not even God can see them, and we "**cross over**" from death, from being born dead in sin, into life, being made alive in Christ Jesus.

See, this "crossing over" is not only at the moment of death we are so afraid of. "*We know that we have passed from death to life,*" it says in 1 John, "*because we have loved the brethren*" (3:14), which is a fruit of faith. In baptism faith is powerfully created, even in babies, and that is crossing over from death to life. So the sacrament of baptism is very closely connected to Jesus' resurrection. Jesus passed through the valley of the shadow of death -- a crossing-over that troubled Him very greatly in the Garden of Gethsemane, and made Him shiver, shake and sweat, so He shared those feelings that come to you -- and on the third day He victoriously crossed over from death into life when He arose.

But it was just the beginning! His mission is to bring this to you. Baptism is His first means of doing so. Just as the priests were carrying the ark of the covenant, and the ark was where God came to be really present with His people, and it went ahead of the people and after them in the Jordan River crossing, so also the means of grace such as Baptism actually carry God Himself to you, and also with you as you go through this life. This brings us to the daily meaning of your baptism, and this is even more closely connected with our Easter celebration.

The Bible says in more than one place that you've actually been baptized into Jesus' death and into His resurrection. In Colossians 2 it says: "*You were buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through*

faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (v. 12). In Romans 6, as you see in the memory verse for this week, it says: *"If we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,"* and it's talking about dying with Christ *in baptism*, since a few verses earlier it says: *"As many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."*

This is how what Jesus did on Good Friday and on the glorious third day actually come to you. Your baptism put you into Jesus' death, where your sins are nailed to His cross and buried in His tomb. Your baptism put you into Jesus' resurrection, where you arise with no sins, no death, no condemnation. What St. Paul even says is that this didn't only mean something on the day you were baptized, but it means something every day, all the way until your last day.

It means that when you have sins, when you are frightened by death, when your faith is defeated, when you give in to the world, when you approve what you shouldn't, when you fail in your struggle with a temptation, when you can't forgive, when you don't quell your anger or deny your lust, what do you do? What does your baptism mean? That you drown your Old Adam, your sins and evil lusts – you repent, you send these sins to be swallowed up by that heap of baptismal water that takes them very far away. And you go safely on: the new man in you, your forgiven self, strengthened by grace, *"walks in newness of life."* This is what gives you strength to forsake sin, stand up to the world, and laugh at the devil and death. You are walking with Jesus, your Joshua, your Savior.

This is what the crossing over really is. It isn't about death, that toothless foe. It's about Jesus leading you by grace every day, until you find yourself in the Promised Land of heaven, where everything is just as He promised. Amen!