

Josh 3-4  
Tim Anderson 25/10/20

Today we read the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River.

If you were to go to Israel today,

the Jordan River is a muddy trickle.

You'd wonder what the big deal is about.

But that's because the water has been mostly diverted for irrigation.

Back in Joshua's time, the Jordan was a mighty river in spring.

You could only cross it at the ford.

And even then only the strong and fit could cross.

You couldn't easily drive your herds and flocks across.

And if a whole nation was migrating,

well what about the elderly and the very young.

It would be a tough ask to carry them all.

Particularly if there was an opposing army on the other bank.

But God has a different plan.

Israel is not going to cross at the ford.

They are going to walk straight across on dry land.

This is important to keep them safe

from an opposing army on the other bank.

If you cross where everyone knows

that it's impossible to cross at that time of year,

then there won't be anyone waiting for you on the other bank.

But it's also important from a symbolic perspective.

Joshua is a new leader.

He's replaced the great Moses, the servant of Yahweh.

So God is giving Joshua the credentials of being a leader like Moses.

Moses led you across the Red Sea on dry land.

Now Joshua will lead you across the Jordan River on dry land.

So the Israelites march to the banks of the Jordan

and what do they do?

They camp for three days.

Why?

What's the point?

Have you ever been on a car trip in rural Australia,  
and you are chatting away to someone else in the car,  
and then some time later  
there's a comment about passing through some little town,  
and you didn't notice it at all?

Blink and you miss it.

It's important that doesn't happen to the Israelites.

They need to spend a few days camped on the banks of the Jordan.

A few days thinking to themselves,

"Well how are we going to get across there?"

I've heard the stories

about our parents going across the Red Sea 40 years ago,  
but honestly,

if you think I'm wading out into that torrent of water,  
you've got another think coming."

Then when God does take them across,  
they will sit up and take notice.

What is about to happen is not something insignificant  
so that you might blink and miss it.

This is important.

Take some time to think about it,  
so that you realise its full significance.

Sometimes we wonder

why God makes us wait for things in our own lives.

Why doesn't he give me what I ask for now?

But waiting has the effect of stopping us taking things for granted.

If the Israelites spend a few days staring at a river in flood,  
they aren't going to take it for granted  
when they walk across on dry land.

If we spend a few years asking God for things,  
then we won't take it for granted when he gives us what we ask for.

But after the three days are up,

the officers give the people instructions about how to proceed.

Here's how it works.

First of all the ark of the covenant will go out into the river.

Then the river will stop flowing.

Then you can all cross.

Simple right?

But why does the ark of the covenant have to go into the river first?

Why can't God just stop the water flowing and the people walk across?

Well of course God could just stop the water flowing.

But what is the ark of the covenant?

It's a box with the ten commandments on two stone tablets and a couple of other things inside.

But importantly, it represents the presence of God with the people.

How do they know God is with them?

Well he travels with them.

He's sitting on the ark of the covenant like it's a chariot.

So the ark of the covenant goes into the Jordan River first

so that when the water stops flowing,

there can be no question about who made it stop.

It's like the lollypop lady at the school crossing.

She goes out onto the road and holds up her stop sign.

Then the cars stop and the kids can walk across.

Who made the cars stop?

The lollypop lady did.

Who made the water stop?

God did.

But because the ark is the symbol of God's presence with his people, the people have to be very respectful of the ark.

When they are following the ark into the river,

they need to keep about a kilometre behind it.

Yahweh is their God,

but he's not to be treated in a cavalier fashion.

Just because he's stopping the river for you

doesn't mean you can joke around and pretend you are old mates.

This is the Lord of heaven and earth we're talking about.

So imagine you are one of the priests carrying the ark.

You might like to close your eyes to better imagine it.

You walk up to river in flood,

the rest of the nation are a long way back.

And when you get to the banks of the river,

what do you see?

It's a river in flood.

Nothing is different from how it's been the last three days.

And Joshua says to you,

3:8 "When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters,

go and stand in the river."

How are you feeling about that?

Are you a little bit tentative as you take a step into the river?

Why is it that God doesn't stop the water first

and then ask the priests to carry the ark out into the dry river bed?

Well that's just not the way that God does things.

God always asks us to get our feet wet.

The river will never stop before you put your feet in.

You see from our perspective the most important thing

is that the water stops and we don't get swept away.

But from God's perspective,

the most important thing is that we have faith in him.

And if he stops the river before our feet get wet,

then we will never learn to exercise faith.

What does that mean for us as Christians?

It will mean that when you act with integrity at work,

it's going to feel like career suicide,

before you find out that God won't let you down.

It will mean that when you invite someone to read the Bible with you,

or invite them along to church,

or talk to them about your faith,

it's always going to feel like you are risking that relationship,

before you find out that God won't let you down.  
It means that when you decide to give money to some Christian cause,  
it's always going to feel like you are being irresponsibly reckless,  
before you discover that God provides for your every need.  
Friends we have to learn to get our feet wet.  
We've had to learn that in our church this year.  
We discussed doing a video upgrade.  
It felt dangerous.  
No one knew  
whether some virus induced financial collapse was around the corner.  
The wardens and PC didn't know when they were discussing it  
just how generous the congregation would be in supporting the project.  
There were lots of unknowns.  
But we got our feet wet.  
And guess what?  
God has provided for our needs.  
We haven't had a financial shortfall.  
And who among us would want to go back  
to pictures freezing up and connections dropping out?  
But having taken the plunge on the video upgrade,  
does that mean that God is finished with us now?  
We've learned how to trust him and reached the finishing line?  
I'm sorry.  
It's a bit like working out.  
Your muscles never say,  
OK you've done enough exercise now,  
you'll be fit for the rest of your life.  
That's not how it works.  
You have to keep exercising to stay fit.  
And in our case  
the video upgrade was just a warm up for the building project.  
We are going to be called up to trust God again there,  
and it will be even more challenging.  
Just like when Israel crossed the river,  
they were going to have to trust God again with the walls of Jericho.

God keeps finding reasons why we need to trust him to exercise our faith muscles.

You haven't arrived till you see him face to face.

Until then faith will always be required.

Well the priests carrying the ark did step into the water, and the flow of water stopped.

Who knows how that happened?

Joshua tells us that the water banked up at Adam near Zarethan.

Give or take that's 100km from where Israel was crossing the river.

Maybe there was a landslide at Zarethan.

Maybe God intervened supernaturally.

In either case it's a miracle.

I mean it's no less miraculous to organise a landslide to stop the water right when the Israelites need to cross 100km down stream as it is to supernaturally stop the water flowing.

However it happened,

the water stopped,

the people crossed over.

The priests carrying the ark stood in the middle of the river.

And they came out last of all.

And then 4:16 tell us,

"And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

No sooner had they set their feet on dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before."

It's very important

that they didn't wait hours and hours for the water to return.

It came back straight away.

It's a clear sign that God had organised safe passage across the river just for them.

And when they didn't need it anymore, then it wouldn't be there anymore.

In the Black Saturday bushfires,  
a member of our Healesville church had her house burn down.  
She needed to escape from the raging bushfire.  
She tried to drive away.  
Her car wouldn't start.  
She prayed.  
Lord save me, or I'm going to get incinerated.  
She turned the key in the ignition again.  
The car started.  
She made it as far as the safety of the church in the town.  
Her house was about 8km out of town.  
She stopped the car.  
And it would not start again.  
She got the mechanic to look at it.  
"That should not have gone yesterday."  
Her car worked for as long as she needed it to.  
And then it wouldn't work anymore.  
Just so she knew that God was looking after her.

Well we told most of the story.  
But I left a bit out.  
Something else happened after the people crossed the river  
but before the priests came out,  
and the river flowed again.  
Joshua sent twelve strong men back  
to collect twelve large stones from the middle of the river.  
Those twelve stones were set up in a pile.  
The pile was to be a reminder for the people.  
God knew  
that they would always have trouble putting their faith in him.  
They needed reminders of his great work on their behalf.  
The generation who experienced the event would get old and die out.  
A new generation would come along.  
They would need to learn the story of what God had done.  
Then it could be part of their story.

They could own the corporate experience of the nation even though they were not personally there when the waters stopped and the people crossed the river.

This is in fact not an unusual thing for God to do. What did God do when he took the Israelites out of Egypt? He set up the Passover meal as an annual reminder of the event. The Passover was like the pile of stones, a remembrance of what God had done. When we remember what God has done, we are proclaiming his faithfulness to his people.

What did God do when he promised Abraham that he would give him the land? He gave him a physical sign to remind him of the promise. The covenant of circumcision was a physical sign to remind the Israelites of the promise that God had made to them. It's no coincidence that the very next thing Joshua does after crossing the river is to circumcise the men who had not been circumcised while Israel had been wandering in the desert for 40 years, and to celebrate the Passover together as a nation.

He's saying by his actions, "We need to remember the big story that we are part of and we need to put in place reminders so that the generations that come after us are enabled to remember that story and become part of it themselves."

You might have some piles of 12 stones in your life. Things you do to make sure you remember important things that have happened in the past. I'm not a big one for eating in restaurants. Why would you when you have a wife and many daughters who cook restaurant quality food at home?

It wouldn't make sense.

But I like to celebrate our wedding anniversary by going to a restaurant.

Why? The food is no better than I get at home.

But it forces me to pause and remember God's kindness to me.

Otherwise I might just take it for granted.

It's not a bad idea, I think,

to have personal memorials of God's goodness to you.

It helps when times are tough.

It helps when you need encouragement to have active faith.

When you need some encouragement

to get in the river and get your feet wet.

But it's also good for us to have corporate memorials of God's kindness.

The twelve stones that Joshua erected were for all of God's people

to remember his goodness to them as a community.

How do we remember God's goodness to us as a community?

Well we could have a party to celebrate the opening of our new kitchen.

We could have a party to celebrate when we are allowed back to church.

We could even have a party on Alex Packett's birthday,

whenever that is,

and celebrate that the church

that got down to 25 people around the turn of the century

is back up and flourishing again.

It's actually not hard to think of examples of God's kindness.

You just have to think of ways to be intentional about marking them.

As a nation, we could celebrate Samuel Johnston and Richard Marsden

the chaplains who bought the gospel out to Australia

with the early settlers.

That wouldn't be politically correct,

but it's a cause for celebration of God's kindness to our nation.

Well I wanted to give some specific examples

of how we might erect the twelve stones for us.

But actually if you think about it,

there are two lots of twelve stones in the lives of all Christians.

Memorials that we set up by God's instruction,  
 just like Joshua set up the twelve stones by God's instruction.  
 Those memorials are baptism and the Lord's Supper.  
 What is God's greatest kindness to us?  
 It's not a new kitchen or a large congregation.  
 It's not a wonderful wife or being able to gather in person as his people.  
 God's greatest kindness to us is our salvation.  
 The forgiveness of sins; the gift of eternal life.  
 The adoption as his children, the indwelling of his Spirit.  
 That is the greatest gift.  
 It's all one gift.  
 I've sort of split it into parts but it's all one gift.  
 Like a diamond we look at it from different angles.  
 And we need to remember it,  
 so we baptise new believers,  
 and we celebrate the Lord's Supper together.  
 These are the memorial stones  
 that help us to remember God's great goodness.

I guess some of you think I'm a bit of a radical minister.  
 Up here running church with no robes on and no dog collar.  
 But I'm actually very conservative.  
 Many of my contemporaries run communion services once a month  
 or once a fortnight.  
 They want to have services that feel a bit fresher with less liturgy,  
 so they run services of the word with no communion.  
 But I'm convinced that God erected these piles of twelve stones  
 because we need constant reminders.  
 And if you need things fresher with less liturgy,  
 then there are ways of achieving that  
 without getting rid of memorials that were set up by God's instruction.

Well there have been quite a number of things  
 for us to learn along the way in Joshua 3&4.  
 But as I finish, I want to just recap two of them.

1. You've got to get your feet wet.  
You are going to have to act on your faith  
before you see God working.  
He's not going to start working  
before you've actually put your faith into action.  
If you aren't seeing God working,  
could it be that you actually are not getting your feet wet?

2. When God does work powerfully,  
then it's worth being intentional about remembering that.  
There are all manner of God's kindnesses  
that we could remember together as a church.  
There are kindnesses to you as an individual  
that you could be intentional about celebrating.  
And of course we must be intentional  
about remember the greatest blessing of all.  
The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross has two memorials  
set up by God's specific instruction.  
Those we need to remember without fail,  
lest we forget.