



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Vessels for the Promise of God

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 7, 2010
All Saints' Sunday (Year C)

Joshua 3:7-17

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The Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. [8] You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.' " [9] Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God." [10] Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: [11] the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. [12] So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. [13] When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."

[14] 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. [15] 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, [16] 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 toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. [17] 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.

Today is All Saints' Sunday, a time to remember those who have gone before us in the faith. We remember those whom the whole world remembers, and we remember those cherished only by us in this community of faith.

As I've thought about this particular celebration this year, a recurring theme keeps circling through my mind. I've heard it so often over the last few years that I sometimes wake with it in my thoughts. Here's what I keep hearing: "A lot of the saints of the church are dying. Who's going to replace them?"

Who's going to replace them? It's an old question. In fact, it's this very question

that haunts the people of Israel as they sit on the edge of the Jordan River, ready to cross into the Promised Land. These people of faith who were led out of captivity in Egypt; who marched through the waters of the sea on dry ground; who wandered in the wilderness for decades; who kept going because of the hope of a Promised Land; these people of faith finally found themselves on the brink of the promise being realized. And again the waters stand in their way—this time the waters of the Jordan. When they were at this point before, they had Moses and a promise. But this time, all they have is the promise, because their leader is gone.

Moses has died, and so the people are consumed by a litany of questions: Who will replace him? Who will lead us through these waters into the land flowing with milk and honey? Who can ever take the place of Moses? What becomes of us now? And, then the most haunting question of all, Is the Lord still among us or not?

All of these questions because of the one question that was on the minds of the people of Israel: Who will replace this saint?

It's an old question, but God doesn't give them much time to think through their answers. While the people of Israel are wringing their hands, God is busy calling Joshua.

The very first word God speaks to Joshua is this: "My servant Moses is dead." But God doesn't give Joshua much time to dwell on that. God continues with these words: "Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon, I have given to you, as I promised to Moses."

And then God spoke the good news to Joshua: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them."

We may wonder who will replace the saints, but God doesn't. Joshua is given a new call—and the roots of that call go deep. Joshua's call is rooted in the promise of God first made to Abraham, then to Isaac, then to Jacob, then to Joseph, then to Moses. Whoever the leader of the day was, they were sent forth by the abiding promise and presence of God. The biblical witness is convinced of this: God will accomplish what God has promised to do. No matter the obstacles; in spite of the opposition; even in the face of absurd odds, God will do what God has promised.

It's as if God is saying to Joshua: "The people of Israel can't imagine what it will be like without Moses. But I am now calling you—yes, you, Joshua—to lead them. And what they saw in Moses they will see in you. They will know that I, the living God, am with you."

So what happened? The people end up in the Promised Land. Our text today tells the story of the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. All of the years of waiting and hoping come to an end as Joshua leads the people into the land of promise. On the surface, they may think it's because of Joshua. But we readers know the truth: It's God's work through Joshua.

Did you catch it? Our text today began with God telling Joshua: “Do this and the people will see that I am with you.”

And then Joshua stands before the people and gives them their instructions. And, as the feet of the elders carrying the ark of God enter the Jordan, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap. And then Joshua told the truth: “By this you shall know that among you is the living God.” He didn’t point to his leadership, but to the presence and promise of God.

On one of their trips to see relatives several years ago, my parents worshiped in a Presbyterian Church that had been built in 1786. They brought me back a bulletin that pictured the cornerstone of the sanctuary. Etched into that stone was the story of those who had sacrificed to help establish that church and build that sanctuary. Just below that was a message that said this: “Reader: if you think of this work, Give God the Glory.”

It was as if they were saying, “People were involved in this, to be sure. But it’s God’s work that they were about.”

For a while the promise was in the hands of Abraham and Sarah. Then Isaac. Then Jacob. On down the line of saints. But it was never theirs. The promise always and even now belongs to God.

And now, you and I stand at this place and time with the promise of God in our hands. The promise of God has been held by countless hands before ours. This is a day for remembering them and their faithfulness. But it’s also a day for remembering those who will come after us, whose hands are waiting to hold the promise in their hands.

That’s the beauty of the community of the saints. We are united—past, present, and future—as our hands hold the promise which always belongs to God. And we are also united when we gather at this table to feast upon God’s grace together.

So, who will replace the saints? It’s a real question. It’s an especially poignant question for us as we consider the lives of those from this community of faith who died this past year. But as painful and as challenging as the question is, we can’t sit around wringing our hands worrying about it, because our hands—yours and mine and all of God’s saints—our hands are too busy. After all, we’re holding the promise of God. We’re holding the promise of God.