

THE
BON AIR
PULPIT

January 3, 1999

Scripture: *Joshua 3:1-6*

Sermon: *“Are You Ready
to Cross the River?”*

Every January, on Sunday nights, we study a book of the Bible. Beginning next Sunday night we are going to be studying the book of Joshua. This morning I want to introduce to you a part of that book, from the third chapter. Usually, in our symbolism when we speak about crossing Jordan, we speak about dying. Most of you grew up singing, “On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye, to Canaan’s fair and happy land where my possessions lie.” Or you’ve sung the spiritual that talks about, “I won’t have to cross Jordan alone.” But in the Bible when the people of Israel passed over Jordan they were not dying, but rather fulfilling God’s call on their lives. They were becoming all that God had dreamed for them to be. This morning we are going to read about their literally crossing Jordan, but we are going to quickly move over to the symbolism of it: to talk about our becoming what God wants us to be, our surrendering ourselves to walk with God and become available to God, and to become in our lives His dream for us.

So let’s read this beautiful story this morning. It is in the third chapter of Joshua. *“Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: ‘When you see the ark of the covenant...’”* --let me just remind you that that is a beautifully carved box that contains the ten

commandments—so “...when you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.” That sounds like a good New Year’s Eve sermon, doesn’t it? “*But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it.*’ Joshua told the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.’ Joshua said to the priests, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.’ And so they took it up and went ahead of them.” Down to verse 14. “*So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away...*” Verse 17. “*The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.*”

The grandest drama in the Old Testament is the exodus of the Jews from their slavery in Egypt and their entering into their promised land. Even today among the Jews their most sacred and their most joyous celebrations are the commemoration of this event. Now if we are to understand what is going to happen in this passage, we are going to have to put three facts of geography in our minds. The first is Egypt. Egypt is where the people of Israel had been slaves for hundreds of years. Slavery is the most dehumanizing of all acts of man because it makes a person a thing, just a cog in the economic machinery. You can go home at night, but you can’t call it your home, and you never can make a decision without asking somebody else. You really

never belong to yourself. But one day God released these people from slavery. He did not do it by an invasion of a foreign army. He did not do it by the insurrection of the people. But by the acts of God these people-- about a million and a half or two million of them--suddenly were told by the Egyptians, “Get out of here, go, we don’t want to have you anymore.”

Now the second part of geography is the Sinai Peninsula, or the wilderness. When you look at a map you are aware that along the Mediterranean Sea there is an ancient trade route that goes from Egypt to the Middle East and you can walk it in seven days. And so the question is, why didn’t God just put them on this path and lead them to Israel in seven days? Well, the answer to that question is that he turned them south and let them walk in the wilderness--barren area--for two years because he needed to teach them some great lessons. You see, for all of those years of slavery these people had thought like slaves. They had acted like slaves; and now they had to re-tool the way they thought. It was in the wilderness, you will recall, that God gave them the Ten Commandments so that they would understand how they were to live before God. And it was in the wilderness that they learned how to worship, because it was there that they built the tabernacle. So this was a crash course of discipleship in walking with God.

The third part of the geography is the land of Israel, or Palestine, and they were to end up there. That is where they were to develop and to grow and to become a nation, and it was there that they were to enter into partnership with God.

Now, in our faith, we have taken these literal places and we have made them symbolic; and much of this symbolism that I am going to talk with you about comes out of the Book of Hebrews, chapter 3 and chapter 4. All of us who are believers lived at one time in our Egypt. We lived in our bondage, in our slavery; we were never what God meant for us to be. We could always dream

about what we ought to do. We just never got around to doing it. And God came to us in our slavery--in our spiritual slavery--and God freed us. Our freedom came from nothing we had done. It is the grand acts of God in our lives. Then God leads all of us into this crash course: wilderness time in which we learn how to walk with Him. There is no such thing as instant maturity. There is no such thing as coming to Christ today and instantly becoming a Christian leader. In fact, the Bible warns us about taking new believers and thrusting them into leadership; the Bible says they are not ready for that. The Bible says you need to learn the same lessons that the Israelites learned in the wilderness. You need to learn how to think differently. You need to learn how to obey God, the commandments. And you need to learn how to worship. The time frame is about the same. It takes a person about two years, once they have come to faith in Christ, if they are sincere in their faith, to learn how it is. And then God wants us to move on into our Holy Land, into our Palestine, the place where we can walk with God and serve God and be in fellowship with God.

Now, when I talked about geography I forgot to tell you that in between these three places there are two bodies of water. When the children of Israel went walking out of Egypt first thing they ran into was the Red Sea. It is a barrier, it is a wall; how can you get across the Red Sea? And you will recall that God, by his miracle power, opened the water and the people walked across. And what happens to all of us, as believers, is that when we get ready to walk out of our Egypt and we say, “How can I get across these barriers in my life?”, then God opens the door and we find His power available in our lives and we are able to move out. And one of the most remarkable demonstrations of the power

of God comes when a person decides he wants to serve God and to give his life to Jesus Christ. If you will just start walking, God will perform miracles in your midst and allow you to come out of your Egypt.

Now, when they had gone through the wilderness they came to the second body of water. That is the Jordan. And what they had to decide then is to cross over Jordan. Now let me tell you what their problem was. It was a big deal for them because they knew what was on the other side of Jordan. The enemy was there. Battles had to be fought. Decisions had to be made. They had to start living a disciplined life. And so when they get to the Jordan God said, "All right, camp here. I want you to think through what you are getting ready to do. Are you ready to cross over Jordan?" Everybody in this room, if you are a believer, has come to your Jordan. There was a time in your life when you had to decide: I am ready to move out of my wilderness wanderings, I am ready to move out of my mediocrity, I am ready to move out of this part of my walk with God, and I am willing to make a commitment to be what God wants me to be. What I am saying to God when I come to my Jordan is, "Dear God I want to be what you want me to be, I want to go where you want me to go, I want to give my life to you, and whatever you want to do with me, here I am. I am ready to face whatever battles are necessary, I am ready to make whatever decisions are needed. I am ready to say to you, 'Dear God, whatever you want I am ready to go.'"

Now the problem is that many of us are like those people were. We don't know whether we want to do that or not. Now I need to remind you that Christianity is more than an event in your life. It is true that one day you got saved. But Christianity is more than an event. Christianity is a journey. And what God wants you to do is walk with Him and He will

lead you through the wilderness and take you to a spot where He says, "All right, now are you ready to go further.? And He will say to you, "Right here are all of my blessings for you. Are you ready now to give yourself totally to me so that you can become all that I dreamed for you to be?" Many of you in this room this morning are standing in front of your joy. You are trying to determine whether you are going to be all that God meant for you to be. Now let me tell you, this is serious stuff. Serious stuff. Thirty-eight years prior to this time these people's fathers and grandfathers stood at that same spot. They said, "We're not going to cross Jordan." God said, "I opened the Red Sea for you. I brought you out of Egypt. You didn't lift a sword. Here is all that I want to do for you. Come on." And they said, "We left. We don't want to go." And remember what happened? God said, "Okay. If you won't do it, then go back to your mediocrity and go back to your simplicity of faith, and all of my dreams for you will *not* be fulfilled." And you will recall that every person in that group died in the wilderness.

Let me remind you that the greatest judgment you as a Christian face is *what you will not receive*. Here is God wanting to bless you. Here is God wanting to give to you. Here is God wanting to provide all this for you, and you say no. So God says, "Back to the wilderness." The door is closed. Now here are these children and grandchildren. Thirty-eight years later they are standing there, and the question is: are they going to go? But there is a bigger question: *are you going to go?* Are you ready to cross the Jordan? Are you ready to say, "Dear God, I want to be where you want me to be, go where you want me to go, I want to give myself to you, here I am."

Now let me tell you some principles that you will need to guide you to help you make your decision. *Number one: it may look like the right thing but the wrong time*. In the scripture I read, you will note that the Jordan was at flood stage. Snow on mountains up in Lebanon melts and

comes down through the Sea of Galilee and down the Jordan River, and the Jordan just spreads out everywhere. And all of them could have said, "Lord, good idea, bad time. I am ready to go but, Lord, I am not ready to go now. You don't know the problems I am confronting. You don't know the barriers that I have out there. You don't know the decisions I have to make. I'll go, but on my timetable, not yours." One of the first things that you learn about making a deeper commitment to God is that *you operate on his schedule and not on yours*. And you need to be reminded that difficulties in your life are a stage on which God demonstrates His great power. Why do you think he waited until flood time? To show them that even in floods He could open rivers. Why has God waited for this period of time in your life to turn to you and say, "Now is the time to go." Because He knows it is difficult, but he wants to show you what he can do in your life.

The second principle: what is ahead is so wonderful the cost is insignificant. If they could ever understand. You see all they looked at was the river. They didn't look beyond. They didn't see all the blessings God was going to give them. And many of us just look at the difficulties, we look at the river, and we cannot see all of what God has for us. If today you had just a glimmer of what God can accomplish with you and what God wants to do in you and what God wants to do for you-- what's a river? Our problem is we can't see beyond our noses. And God says, "Remember what I called you for. Its a land of milk and honey."

The third principle that will help you: you are to cross that river because God has a call and a claim on your life. Now remember, God did not call these people out of Egypt to bring them to the Sinai Peninsula. He called them out of Egypt to get them to the Holy Land. Why did He want to get them to the Holy Land? Because He had a purpose for them. *Their purpose was to receive the revelation of God and to share it with the*

whole world. Now let me ask you: why did God save you? So you could come to church and sit and let somebody tell you why you think you were saved? No, you see, *God has a great plan for you. God has a great purpose for you. And He saved you so he could develop you and use you*. If you are just content to be in the wilderness, then you are destroying God's whole claim on your life. I don't know what God wants to do with you. I don't know what God can do with you. But he can do a lot more with you than you could ever imagine. He wants to do something with you beyond your fondest dreams. God has a plan and a purpose for you, and you are never going to be happy until you fulfill that call of God on your life.

The next principle: to cross the Jordan calls for unconditional surrender. By *unconditional* I mean: God, I give you my life, I see no purpose in my life apart from you, and Lord, I don't even want to think anything that would cause harm to you. I want to fulfill your claim on my life and your call on my life. And God, I just want to come without any strings attached and I want to say, "God here I am. I don't know what you want to do with me, but here I am, and I am ready to cross the Jordan." Now let me remind you of this. God opens the river for you to get over. He doesn't open the river for you to get back. He makes it easy and inviting to go over but he makes going back a terrifying judgment for you to make. "So," He says, "I want you to know that when you come to cross over, I am asking for all that you are." If a person understands the God who has saved him, that is an easy surrender. If you have a warped, twisted concept of who God is, then you feel like you have to hold on to something when you come to give your heart and your life to him. Now here's the question of the morning: *are you ready?* Are you ready to say to God

on the first Sunday of 1999, “I’ve been standing at that Jordan trying to determine if I’m really going to give myself totally to you. Lord, today, I have decided. Yes.”

Now let me tell you some things you need to know before you make your decision. When they got ready to cross over, God said, “I want the priests to carry the ark of the covenant, and they go first.” What you are doing is committing, “God, I am going to follow you. I’m not going to veer off this way and that. This isn’t my idea; all I am saying today, God, is whatever you lead, I want to follow.”

The second thing God said was, “Don’t get too close to the ark.” Treat this decision with reverence and awe and mystery. This is between you and God. This is big-time stuff. Don’t go rushing up there and say, “Well God, if you need any help I’ll be glad to give you some. “ This is the God of the universe. Treat the decision with reverence.

Then Joshua turned to him and He said, “...and consecrate yourself.” *Consecrate* means that you simply say, “I give myself to God for your purpose. And, God, I am saying to you that whatever you want, I want to do it,” and I just simply say, “Today, God, I am going to follow you; I give you myself.”

And when they did that He said, “All right, walk forward. If you walk towards the river you will see the hand of God.” And when they started walking across, the Bible said, as soon as their feet touched the water the water opened. Now, I remind you, they didn’t know it was going to open. He didn’t say, “If you walk towards the water I am going to open it.” He said, “Walk towards the water.” They started walking towards the water and the water opened. What God is waiting for is for you to make the first move. You can’t sit over here on the hill and say, “God, if you work everything out I will be glad to walk.” No, He says, “Are you willing to trust me? Are you willing to

walk and see how I am going to do it?” And when you are willing to trust God deeply enough to walk towards that barrier in your life, God will destroy the barriers and open the river and let you walk across. The question again: are you ready to walk towards the river? Whatever your Jordan is, whatever your barrier is, whatever you have been holding up to keep you away from total commitment to Him, are you willing to walk toward it believing that the God who has called you and the God who is ahead of you and the God who will direct you will meet the needs of your life?

I don’t like the last part of this story, but it’s in there, so I’ve got to tell you. You know who He asked to carry the ark? The priests. Let me tell you what I would have done then, the same thing I would have done now: if some of y’all would go on ahead and tell me its all right, I’ll be glad to follow. But He didn’t do that. He said the priests were to lead the way, so the reason I came down here today is: this is the Jordan and I can’t ask you to do something I am not willing to do myself. So, symbolically for me, I have walked towards the Jordan and I am standing here. Now I don’t know that I would have done the second thing. If I had been standing there with this big wall of water in front of me, you know what I would have been saying? “Y’all hurry up now! Y’all hurry up! “ And I would have kept looking up. “Lord, all of us are not out yet! “ I know I’ve got to be willing to stand here as long as it takes all of you to get across. And what I wanted to say the first Sunday of the year is: symbolically, I am standing in Jordan and I am ready for you to walk across. Thirty eight-years ago the people had said, “It’s too hard, costs too much, we don’t need it, let’s just coast on through.” God came back again and He said, “What I want is for people to be willing to follow me, give themselves to me, fight the battles and win the victory, I want you to come.” So this is what I want to ask this morning. Those of you who have never given your life to Christ, I want to ask you if you would come and say, “This is the

moment I need to come. The river’s open, this is the time to come.” I want to ask those of you who have been kind of floating in your Christian experience to say, “This is it for us. We need to come and get involved in church and we need to get involved in our Christian life.” I am going to ask those of you who have been just kind of in the wilderness to realize you have been there long enough. It is time for you now to move on to total commitment of your life.

Are you ready?