

East of Eden - Joshua 3

One day on my birthday Ceri surprised me by taking me out to the airport. She had told me to keep the day free but hadn't told me what we would be doing. As we got closer to the airport it became clearer to me what the plan was. She was taking me skydiving. Now, we may have talked about wanting to do this someday but talking about jumping out of a plane and actually going through with it are two different things. The surprise of, "we are going skydiving" is followed by 6 hours of training instructing you on all the things that could go wrong and how to survive a 3000ft fall by landing in a swampy marsh etc...

The training takes all day and drags on and on until... All of a sudden you are soaring above the Saanich peninsula and it is time to step out of the plane, grab the strut of the wing, say a quick prayer and then let go.

Sometimes preparing for an event like this is painful and you are eager to skip to the end and just do it. Sometimes you're thankful that there is a time of preparation before the event so that you can fully understand what to do, and get your mind focused around what it is all about.

Maybe you are someone that likes to skip to the action. You don't love talking things through and planning out every last detail. Even when it comes to skydiving you want to skip to the jumping part and skim over all the information about wind speed and emergency chutes.

Or are you someone that needs to have all the details sorted before you take any action? The thought of learning to jump out of a plane and the actual jumping out of a plane happening on the same day seems ridiculous. You want to see the plan and understand what plan B and plan C are. You are the person in the skydiving course that asks the question nobody wants to hear the answer for: "What if the emergency chute fails?"

Whether you love to be prepared or want to skip past the instructions to start playing the game, we all recognize that some events are so important, so crucial, that they demand we prepare ourselves. Not many people would want to skip over the preparation involved in skydiving because they recognize that their lives depend on the training.

In the weeks leading up to our readings today we have seen this preparation in the lives of the Israelites and in the life and leadership of Joshua in particular.

One of the most hotly debated questions in biblical and archaeological research is that of the ethnogenesis of Israel. That can be our word of the day, ethnogenesis - how a people group came to be identified as such. And, if you really want to head down a rabbit hole you can check out some of the links that I've put in the notes for today.

(1. Avraham Faust -

https://www.academia.edu/1484587/How_Did_Israel_Become_a_People_The_Genesis_of_Israelite_Identity_Biblical_Archaeology_Review_201_pp_62_69_92_94;

2. John Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*:

<https://www.ivpress.com/the-lost-world-of-the-israelite-conquest>

3. Podcast with John Walton:

<https://onscript.study/podcast/john-walton-the-lost-world-of-the-israelite-conquest/>)

One of the main problems with tracing the origins of the Israelites is that there is very little archaeological evidence of them until Israel is mentioned as a people group in the Merneptah Stele.

The Merneptah Stele is a black granite plate, which was erected in the Egyptian capital of Thebes around 1207 B.C.E., and commemorates the victories of the pharaoh Merneptah over his many enemies, including the Canaanite city-states and a people group called "Israel". The discovery of the Merneptah Stele reaffirmed the idea that Israel had established themselves in the promised land before the time of the monarchy.

Around the beginning of the Iron Age a group of settlers established themselves in the hill-country and distinguished themselves in their use of pottery, the architecture of their homes, their diet, and their burial practices.

In our text for the week we encounter a crucial event in the establishment of this people in this land.

The covenant promises of the land were about to be realized by the crossing of the Jordan. God was making a way for his people and had finally led them to the point where they would enter into the land. The long preparation of wilderness

wandering through which God had confirmed that He was their God and they were his people was finally culminating in this triumphant entry.

I wonder if Joshua viewed the crossing of the Jordan as the crucial moment in the life of Israel? So many incredible events had taken place before now and in the shadow of these great events and their great leader Moses, Joshua takes up his mantle as the leader of the nation.

I think it would have been easy for Joshua to look back and measure himself down in light of all the miraculous events that happened under Moses' leadership. How God rescued them from Egypt, how he brought them through the Red Sea, How he spoke with Moses, gave him instructions for the tabernacle, the law, and, as we heard a few weeks ago in Exodus 34, even passed in front of Moses and proclaimed his name.

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,¹⁰ forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Ex. 34:6

And so in the first chapters of Joshua the writer is really setting up this new leader of the nation and helping us recognize that God is going to have his back in just the same way that he was with Moses. The Lord speaks to Joshua, Joshua sends spies into the promised land, and in our passage in Joshua 3 he leads the people through the waters.

Perhaps it is in light of the shadow of Moses that the Lord encourages Joshua to be "strong and courageous" in chapter 1. Joshua on the verge of leading the people into the promised land needs God's encouragement and strength in order to take up the mantle of leadership and the responsibility for the people that was now upon him.

On the other hand, we might not want to make too much of Joshua's insecurities. Remember that as Moses' aide, he alone was privileged to accompany Moses to the top of Mount Sinai where Moses received the tablets of the law; Joshua was Moses' attendant at the tent of Meeting and often remained in the holy place when Moses returned to the camp (Exodus 24:12-13); Joshua was placed in charge of the Israelite forces in the battle with the Amelekites (Exod. 17:8-16); and he was one of the spies in the first reconnaissance mission. Joshua was already a great leader in the nation and intimately aware of God's presence and power.

And we might also conjecture that, of course, Joshua is ready to lead the people into the land: after this lengthy period of waiting, and preparation and journeying to get to this side of the river, to be virtually a stone's throw from the land that was promised and yearned for so long now. Well I'm sure you can imagine him pacing back and forth, looking at the land, and salivating over the chance to finally realize the promise that has been so long in coming.

Joshua's preparation was over and it was now time to take up the mantle of leadership. God reassures him at the beginning of our text Joshua 3:7 "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. 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.'"

God tells Joshua that the priests will lead the way with the ark of the covenant. When their feet touch the water the flow from upstream is halted and as the priests stand in the Jordan the people pass over to the other side.

Notice how it is not Joshua's ingenuity that gets them over to the other side. It isn't the strength and might of their army. It isn't the Israelites wealth and influence that secures their pathway into the land. It is the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence and relationship with God by which they are ushered through the water and into the land.

The crossing of the Jordan is not just the realization of the Israelites, it is also the plan and purpose of God who is acting and fighting and enacting a reclamation of this land for them. It is by God's presence that they realize this promise because it is the promise rooted in God's covenant to them as his people. This means that as they begin to act in ways that are contrary to the covenant they also are removed from the land and disqualified from it.

God's covenant people cross over the Jordan and are brought into a land that God has claimed for his people. So often I think we can read the Old Testament and because we are familiar with the story we miss how God is actually the primary character. It isn't Joshua or Israel that takes over the land and then makes God King. It is Yahweh, the warrior god, stronger than the gods of Canaan, who stops

the river from flowing, causes fortresses to shatter, defeats the many kings of Palestine, and establishes and secures his people.

God is King. God is Steadfast. God is Good.

And so, in Psalm 107 we read: “Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.”

God acts for his people and he prepares them and leads them and rescues them and redeems them for his plans and purpose.

The crossing of the Jordan is nothing less than God leading his people out of the wilderness into the land and re-establishing the kind of relationship that was lost when Adam and Eve were banished from the garden.

And so, in Joshua 5 we read that Joshua encounters the commander of the army of the Lord who is neither for Israel or their enemies. The encounter reminds us of Genesis 3 where God plants an angel with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life.

The message is clear. This land is God’s and his people are the ones who submit themselves to his rule.

It is never the question whether God is on our side but whether we are on God’s side.

But when we find ourselves East of Eden, waiting for our moment to enter the land and separated by a raging river, we might question why God has brought us all this way only to encounter another barrier.

I’m sure you agree that this pandemic is much like a wilderness experience. We are eagerly looking over to the other side of 2021 and hoping that the waters part and we are able to cross over.

Maybe you are facing another kind of wilderness because of physical illness or the loss of someone close to you.

Maybe you've been looking at the barriers to employment or the career plans you had for yourself have been derailed.

Maybe you are just feeling stuck. Like there is a gigantic distance between where you are and where you want to be.

When we are wandering, when we feel lost, when we are looking across with the faint whisper of hope that things might be better than they are, It's time to look to the God whose steadfast love endures forever.

It's time to look to the God who saves us from our distress.

It's time to let God lead the way and part the waters and follow him into the land he wants to take.

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An Olympic equestrian champion was asked, "How does your horse know when it has to leap the hedges and hurdles, and why do some horses turn away or stumble?"

The rider answered, "That's simple. You tear your heart out of your body and throw it over the hedge. The horse knows how desperate you are to catch up to your heart. So it leaps."

Are you ready to follow the heart of God no matter where he leads you? Are you ready to follow him through the waters? Are you prepared and planned and ready to jump?

He leads us with his presence. And if we are his people we follow.

Thanks be to God.