

National Identity
March 3

“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.” Joshua 3:17

For the first time, the Israelites have a national identity. Previously, in the first chapters of the book of Joshua, the nation is simply known as ‘the people’ or part of individual tribes. They are called Israelites simply because they share a common ancestry. Here in verse seventeen they are given the title nation. As they cross the river, being led by the Ark of the Covenant, their whole identity changes: from individuals to nation.

The beginning of this country is reminiscent of the beginnings of the Hebrew nation. Even the name of our country is more of a description of identity than a name – United States of America. National identity is written on our currency – *E Pluribus Unum* – out of many, one. The original thirteen colonies overcame differences to stand together against a common tyranny. Following their leaders, they trusted that they would be stronger together than divided. Benjamin Franklin said it best, “We must all hang together or we will hang separately.”

Out of many, one. Out of twelve tribes of Israel, one nation was born, and it was not born out of peaceful, tranquil life, but through the baptism of trials and tribulations in the wilderness. In many ways, as they crossed the Jordan, a few things were happening. Even though they crossed on dry ground, symbolically they were being washed of the disappointment of the desert. The complaining, the disobedience, the short-sightedness was being scrubbed from their pores. Now, as they crossed on dry ground, walls of water miles off at Adam (ironic name, isn’t it) to Zarethan, they followed the one thing that unified them as a nation...

The Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark held items that unified the nation – the ten commandments, Aaron’s rod which had budded and a gold jar filled with manna. Unification in by the law (Word of God), deed – Aaron’s rod prone to miracles, and food – the Israelites were still eating the manna in the wilderness but it was important enough to store some of it in the most holiest of places to remind themselves of the beneficent goodness of the LORD that led them through their wanderings.

1. What things do we as a Christian nation claim as our identity?
2. How is national pride different than national identity?
3. What is a nation comprised of?
4. How does our sense of unity lead us to mission?

12 Stones
March 4

“...Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.” Joshua 4:3

Some of my greatest memories of camping include crossing streams, stepping on water drenched stones, slippery bits of moss waving in the free flowing stream like wheat blowing in the wind. The feel of the water rushing across my feet was refreshing; the vacant air, apart from civilization was captivating. The stones were places of safety, albeit slickery at times, but they were segments of a journey that promised a sense of accomplishment. When I reached the other side and looked back, the stones were a reminder of the journey.

So it was with the twelve stones the Israelites picked up. The River Jordan, we suppose now, was not a sandy bottomed river or even one of those muck-bottomed rivers one might find in the Midwest, but a rock-bottomed river. The stones at the feet of the priests may have been treacherously slippery. Imagine the concentration it took for the priests to carry an extremely heavy gold box filled with two large stone tablets across a stony path. A man had been killed for touching the ark (even with the best of intentions); imagine what would happen to the priests if they dropped the ark and spilled the contents in the empty Jordan River.

Joshua commanded one man from each tribe, symbolically a sign of unity, to gather twelve stones from the feet of the priests. They carried these heavy stones on their shoulders to the place of safety on the other side. Then, they “carried them over to the place where they camped and laid them down there.” They didn’t stack them, they laid them down. No tribe was better than the other. Each stone represented not only a tribe but a specific hardness of the journey whether thirst, hunger, disobedience, etc...

We all have stones in our life those hard places that recur every once in a while. We take those stones with us wherever we settle and then lay them down at a place of rest. Sometimes we tell our children about those stones in order to help them navigate the courses of their own lives. The people of Israel were to remind their children (verse 6 and 7) **“When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”**

1. What are some of the twelve stones in your own life?
2. What does the crossing of the Jordan River symbolize to you?
3. What do you tell others about your past?

Last Ones Out
March 5

“The priests who bore the Ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people crossed over in haste.” Joshua 4:10

They crossed over in haste. No kidding. Humans have an infinite capacity to distrust. Even after all of the miracles, lead by pillar of fire and clouds, voice of God from the mountain, manna from heaven – time after time God Miraculously leads the people, here in the middle of a river where the one side is heaped up, the people need to hurry...

Just in case.

Just in case God gets a bit fickle. *It could happen*, they might think. Just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean that God could have a little payback for the Israelites inconsistencies in the desert. They crossed over in haste kind of like when I get into bed after turning off the lights. I've never had a monster or demon reach out from under my bed to grab my ankle scaring the dickens out of me, but that doesn't mean I don't fear it. So, irrational as it sounds, I turn off the light and sometimes dive over the baseboard. The little monsters can't catch me in mid flight.

In the back of their mind, the Israelites still might distrust God a bit, but perhaps there is an even simpler reason for their haste. The priests had to stand in the middle of the Jordan River, on rocky ground, holding an extremely heavy Ark while all of the people of Israel cross before them. We're not talking about a family of five waiting to get in to Perkins Family Restaurant. This is the whole *nation* of Israel. It's not a five minute procedure but even if it was a mad dash to the other side, it would have taken hours. The priests must stand strong, fighting exhaustion and their own fears of distrust, so that the nation of Israel might pass through imminent death to new life on the other side.

They were the last ones out, these priests, kind of like firefighters or policemen. These public servants are prepared to give their lives for the life of the nation of Israel. They hold the door while the world might collapse around them because it is their duty. I wonder what the priests were thinking about or chatting about while the waters stood off a distance away and all the people and animals were crossing around them. Were they discussing God's goodness hoping to appeal to His sense of fairness that they would be spared? Hoping against hope that they would not be the sacrificial animals? Or were they simply whistling a nice happy tune like *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* from the Monty Python movie *Life of Brian*, ignoring the death that could be coming?

1. Is God fickle? Does God punish for past offenses? Do we deserve to be punished?
2. When was a time in your life when you felt like making a mad dash to escape harm?
3. When was a time you felt like the priests, patiently waiting for others to go first?

Stand in Awe
March 6

“ON that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.” Joshua 4:14

There are very few people of whom we stand in awe. Certainly, some hold athletes, movie stars, politicians or musicians in high regard (well, maybe not all politicians). We love to love them (or in some cases love to hate them) because they embody what civilization would call Perfection. Talented, athletic, beautiful, intelligent – each of the people in the public eye who are admired have some of these gifts. Some people clamor to be next to greatness. We strive to be next to power so that we might perhaps receive some boon from one of the Perfection.

I have seen in the last years that athletes in particular draw much of the glory to themselves. The chest-thumping did not originate with Muhammad Ali, but certainly he was a forerunner by proclaiming himself ‘The Greatest.’ If I were to watch any professional athletic contest, a certain amount of individuals would stand out by their abilities to showboat, talk-smack or whatever the current terminology is. Some of this activity is helpful; it helps to motivate the team, it gives credence to the abilities of the performer. But on some scale, the typical fan feels a sense of quiet outrage. The general sense of cockiness puts me off and I can’t understand why I keep watching, especially when it makes me angry.

They – the athlete, movie star, politician or musician – bring glory to themselves because it gives them power over the people who idolize them. Then, when they make a mistake, they must live with the consequences. That is the alter-ego of vanity.

But Joshua did not exalt himself. Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, was exalted – notice the passivity of the situation – he was exalted by God. God lifted him up just like He did Moses before him. The people stood in awe of him all the days of his life – not just when he was good, or wise, or wonderful – but when he was distracted, unintelligent and belligerent. God exalts normal people and calls them servants. God lifted Joshua up as their leader because He was open to God’s calling in his life. God did not exalt Joshua for Joshua’s sake, but for the people’s sake. They needed a great leader that God was behind.

So Joshua did not draw glory to himself; he did not thump his chest when he defeated the Amorites. He did not stand in front of the people, arms raised, thanking them for their patronage. Joshua did not take the job as leader of the Israelites for his own glory but because God needed him. And God exalted him for it.

1. Name a time in your life when you have drawn glory to yourself.
2. What is the difference between pride and arrogance?
3. How does God exalt you in your own life?
4. What does it mean for you to be open to God’s calling?

Israelites Honed
March 7

“When all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them, because of the Israelites.” Joshua 5:1

Why did the Israelites have to wander in the wilderness? What good could possibly come out of forty years of walking about?

I asked the question when I was growing up. I knew that the Israelites complained a lot, they disobeyed God at the holy mountain; generally they were twelve difficult tribes of individuals. Of course there are consequences to all decisions, but forty years for complaining? Building an idol? Obstinace? I keep wondering if I’m about to be sent into the wilderness to wander for the second half of my life. I have a tendency to be a whiner, an idol maker, a baby. But really, why forty years?

I have this sneaking suspicion that their wandering was not just about punishment but about honing them. They’d been slaves for so many decades; they were not a cohesive unit – not a nation. In the desert, the Israelites had to learn how to trust each other; they needed to comprehend what nationhood was all about. They also needed to learn to fight.

Scholars think that during the years of their wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites learned how to fight. It’s not like they wandered for those forty years and never encountered anyone in those territories. During those forty years they were honed into a fighting machine, not to mention a whole new generation was born during the wilderness years. So, they learned reliance on God, honing of fighting skills, dependence on family – all the things that made the Amorites, the Canaanites and other tribes ‘lose their spirit.’ Imagine, if you can, watching the miracle of the parting of the Jordan, then a never-ending horde of foreigners streaming across to the borders of your own country. Not only must the inhabitants contend with a powerful God but a multitude of vast proportions.

It was in the wilderness that God shaped the people to be a nation – and not just a nation but a cohesive unit that could withstand the attacks of neighboring kings. God created them to be a force to be reckoned with. He allowed them the opportunity to take hold of the promised land, but also the ability to retain and maintain it.

1. In your times of wilderness, what was God trying to show you?
2. What sometimes feels like punishment can often be a time of honing. When is this appreciated and what is positive about it?

Hill of (Gulp)
March 8

It was called Gibeath-haaraloth. It's called a verse I normally skip over because the reality of it is too gruesome and it incites nightmares.

“At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.’” Joshua 5:2

Gibeath-haaraloth means ‘hill of foreskins.’ There are all sorts of adjectives running around in my head at this point but more than an adjective is a question: “Why?”

The Israelites had just crossed into the promised land. On the cusp of a new life, they waited for God's blessing. God required first that the men be circumcised. Symbolically, circumcision is the covenant to sacrifice (ahem) that which is most important to give themselves over to God. Circumcision was also a requirement for any man who wanted to share in the Passover – the feast of celebration of freedom from slavery.

Not only is the “Why?” interesting but also the “How?” I'm not talking about the nitty gritty details of circumcision but the fact that the LORD said, make flint knives for circumcision. Iron was readily available at this time but perhaps the nation wanted to stay to tradition; flint knives were the way that it had always been done. It took longer to make flint knives and was far and away more painful also – which, is usually how things in church are done. Circumcision was seen, in a way, as the cutting away from the typical tendency in man to lust after the carnal. Cutting away the carnal lust for the things of the new land. The promise/covenant still remains. Col. 2:11; Rom. 2:28,29

God also told the Israelites to take their time in remembering the upcoming Passover. If we remember the language of Passover, the slaves were to eat quickly - in haste they were to pack and leave. When they crossed the Jordan, they did so in haste. Not that they have crossed, God, in essence, is saying, “Slow down. We need to take a moment to remember the pain of the past (and prepare for the pain of the present.)

In the busyness of life, we hurry hectic to reach destinations, to achieve the next plane of success all the while forgetting the beauty of patience – of sitting still. There are traditions that most of us have that remind us to sit still for a few moments: some read the newspaper with a cup of coffee in the morning; some people pray while driving to work; some swim. But each of those traditions are rituals that help refocus us on the present day.

1. What is your ritual to begin life each day?
2. In what ways do you struggle with hurry?
3. What are the traditions of the church that make you slow down?
4. What are the painful aspects of life that can be cut away?

Staying True
March 9

“When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.” Joshua 5:8

No truer word ever spoken. It took some time of healing before the Israelites were prepared to take the new land. But this ritual of circumcision was a reminder to the nation that they must not lust after foreign gods. They must not intermingle with the idols and rituals of neighboring kingdoms. They must not incorporate the traditions of surrounding territories into their theology because God is a jealous God seeking love not from idols but from the hearts of His cherished people.

The people had to remain, to stay patient in their pain to wait for the promised day. Does anyone else have problems with remaining patient for the promised land?

When I was little the day of the year that produced the most impatience in me was December 23rd. Not only had we been out of school for a few days, at home with Christmas presents beckoning to us like the sirens singing their song in the water, but the atmosphere of receiving was palpable. I would walk through the living room to stare at the tree; when no one was looking I'd crawl under the Christmas tree to roll around in the presents like a dog rolling around in the grass. Carefully I would pick up the presents with my name on them, touch them to see if I could figure out what future gift would be mine. Picking up each gift, I'd smell them – to this day I love the smell of Scotch tape. Scotch tape smells like Christmas.

Well, my parents got wise to their present-adoring son. Because my fixation with presents got so bad, they started hiding the presents all throughout the house. To my consternation, when the presents went missing under the tree I mistakenly assumed that I'd been bad and Santa had come a bit early to reverse his normal process. After Christmas was over, my parents chided me saying that because of my impatience with receiving, I had neglected family time. I had neglected the most important part of Christmas which is enjoying the relationships (they didn't use that terminology, but I can see now why it was important).

It was hard to wait, but similarly on the edge of the Promised Land, the Israelite nation was preparing to bring the whole family across. Waiting. Healing. It's all part of life.

1. What aspect of life are you most impatient for? Why?
2. Why is family so important? What does the reflective time of Lent turn in your heart with regard to family?
3. How does patience correlate with healing?