

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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Joshua 3 and Psalm 69:1-3
“Come to the Waters: Standing in Harm’s Way”
6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2015

On our recent trip to Nicaragua we experienced a fair amount of rain the day before we left San Felipe. As we rode down the mountain in the 22 passenger bus we wondered what the river would look like. You see, public works like bridges and roads don’t quite make it all the way to Kilambe. The roads are all rock and dirt and the bridges...well there aren’t any. We almost lost our bumper on several occasion crossing the river on the way up to San Felipe, but this time we were more concerned about getting stuck in the middle of the river. Sure enough – the water was running high – and so was our drivers confidence. Carlos is a gifted driver and he had already won our hearts over on the trip with his great driving, his wonderful sense of humor, and his servant’s heart. As we approached the riverbank the group chanted – “Carlos! Carlos! Carlos!” and into the river he drove taking us all the way to the other side – safe and dry!

(SHOW VIDEO)

When the Israelites faced their river crossing in Joshua 3, they didn’t have a bus! And they didn’t have Carlos! But they did have Joshua, some faithful priests from the tribe of Levi, and the Ark of the Covenant – the symbol of the presence of God!

The Jordan River crossing is the second of two water events that serve as bookends to Israel’s wilderness experience. The wilderness was that place where the people were formed as a special community, set apart as God’s people in the world. Israel was the community that God would use to prepare a place for the Messiah to be welcomed into the world as a blessing for all humanity and all creation.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they were set free to worship God. After Moses’ death, Joshua was appointed as God’s leader to take the place of Moses. The crossing of the Jordan demonstrated to the people that they would be able to do great things with Joshua as their new leader and with God as their provider and sustainer. The Israelites were reminded that they were still God’s people and that they were still free to worship and serve God in their new home - The Promised Land.

I am particularly intrigued by the role of the levitical priests who were given the task of standing in the middle of the river and holding the Ark of the Covenant as the Israelites crossed over. These priests were servants of God who stood to remind the people of God’s presence and power in their midst. They stood to offer support and encouragement to the people. If they were willing to remain in the middle of the river, standing in harm’s way, then perhaps the people could trust that God would provide for them and keep them as they journeyed to safety on the other side. They would have needed incredible faith to stand in that river and trust that the water wasn’t going to rush down upon them. Our instinct would be to get through the water and to the other side as quickly as possible, but they stood still, holding the Ark of the Covenant while the whole nation of Israel walked across on dry ground.

One of the distinctive principles of the Protestant Reformation is the Priesthood of All Believers. We are each called by God to serve one another and to represent to one another the presence and power of God. Scripture reminds us that through Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, all of us are welcome to approach God's Throne of Grace with confidence and boldness. Each of us, then is able to stand in the middle of the river for the other. Theologian John Calvin once wrote, "Christ plays the priestly role, not only to render the Father favorable toward us by an eternal law of reconciliation, but also to receive us as his companions in this great office."ⁱ We are priests in Him - standing firm in the promise of God reminding one another of God's faithfulness, of God's promise, of God's grace in the midst of the overwhelming waters that sometimes come our way.

And they do come. There are the personal kinds of situations and experiences which overwhelm us and make us feel like we are in over our heads. Grief from some loss can make us feel like we are drowning or like we cannot breathe. When a loved one dies, especially tragically and unexpectedly we might struggle to deal with our own emotions. This can keep us from freedom and joy. Perhaps you have been the one to stand in the river for someone else as they experienced the burden of grief – as they poured out their sorrow to God you represented the presence and power of God to heal and to restore and deliver us safely to the other side – the fulfillment of God's promise for us. The presence of another to walk along side us in our grief can often be a great encouragement and comfort.

Sometimes we feel like we are drowning from too much responsibility. People are depending on us – looking to us for answers. They expect extraordinary things and we might feel like we have very little to offer. Someone steps into the riverbed for us and reminds us that God is with us and that God will provide and somehow we make it through to the other side.

We feel in over our heads with debt or other financial woes and we don't know how we will get through. The bills are piling up. We are overdrawn on our accounts. We are losing our home. We feel like the waters are surrounding us and we see no way out. But someone steps into the riverbed and says – "This way." God has made a way for you to freedom. And they remind us that we are not alone and that we can get through this together.

The writer of Psalm 69 understood what it feels like to be overwhelmed by the waters of life. While water is the source of life, too much of it can kill us. We have seen this with tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, mud slides. We cry out with similar words when it feels like the water is rising around us. **"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God."** (Psalm 69:1-3)

The other day I was driving and in a hurry to get somewhere and I swerved to miss a turtle that was crossing the road. Normally if there is no traffic, I will pull over and move a turtle to the other side so that they will not risk being hit by another vehicle. This particular day I did not stop because I was in a hurry. My guilty conscience was somewhat soothed when I did not find the turtle squashed in the middle of the road when I passed by the same stretch of road later in the day. He, or she, had made it safely to the other side.

The next day, however, while out for a run, I saw the remains of a turtle that wasn't so fortunate. It reminded me of those in our world who are crushed by individuals, systems, and ideologies that are too powerful for them to withstand. It is as if they are overwhelmed by the water. Even in the land of plenty, where life seems so abundant, their life is stripped away from them by someone else's abuse of power.

When people are overwhelmed by the flood waters, and no one is there to stand in the riverbed for them, they become enslaved, they lose hope, and they are not able to live life to the fullest. No one is there to be their priest...to represent the love of God, the presence of God, the promise of God to be with them and to help them cross over into a new day.

These past weeks, the news has been filled with stories of extraordinary happenings. Some of them are horrific – the Charleston shootings, the terrorist attacks in Kuwait and Tunisia, the ISIS killings in Egypt, and a murder right here in our own back yard on Jetton Road. These are just a few examples of how lives have been stripped away by the violent acts of others. The overwhelming and dangerous waters for these victims come at the hands of others. For some, their journey through this life is over, but for many more, their journey continues...and sometimes in fear and anxiety. As people pick up the pieces around such tragedies they will need love and support. Will people walk into the river and stand in harm's way and help them get safely to the other side?

Of course we are already doing this in many ways as we reach out in love and compassion to one another, as we share with others in our community through local ministries like Ada Jenkins and the Mooresville Soup Kitchen. On a national level, we write letters to our elected officials to encourage them to vote in a way that lifts up the burdened and oppressed. Globally, we are involved in partnerships with Nicaragua and with Kenya and we participate in many other ministries which serve to keep people safe in the midst of overwhelming life circumstances.

On this weekend of celebration we are called to remember that our freedom is a gift from God and it is given to all. When our words and actions cause others pain then we can be sure that we are misusing and abusing our freedom. We are meant to use it for the well-being of others and not for their harm. To keep someone from experiencing the fullness of life and love is to rob them of their freedom. To purposefully act in a way that causes someone else to stumble is to sin against them and God. To deny someone basic needs while you enjoy your own is to live a double standard. To ignore my brother or sister who is drowning in the flood waters of oppression or hardship is to accept the status quo and to walk in blindness.

I heard a song from my High School days on the radio the other day. Bruce Hornsby and the Range sang about some of the social ills of the day. The chorus goes – “That’s just the way it is...some things will never change...That’s just the way it is... ah but don’t you believe them!” The song affirms our willingness to accept that things are just the way they are and there is nothing we can do about it. But it also challenges us to step beyond the status quo to speak the truth...and Jesus said the truth will set us free! We do not have to accept that the turtle always just gets squashed. We are called to stop and help the turtle to the other side of the road! We are invited to look for opportunities to stand against the oppressive forces of the world, to stand in the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to stand in harm's way so that all may arrive safely to their Promised Land.

We have a choice to make. Will we be the cause of suffering or will we be ones who stand in support and encouragement on the way to freedom and new life?

When the water is rising around you, who is standing in the river for you? Think of those who have been there for you in the past and give thanks!

When the water is rising for others and becoming overwhelming for them, will you show the same kindness and represent the presence and love of God for them?

As we come to the communion table this morning, we remember that our Lord Jesus Christ has given himself for the sake of the world. He stood against the flood of sin and death and was victorious for our sake. Now he stands as our Great High Priest, granting us his righteousness so that we might find grace, love, and freedom forevermore. As the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Let us now use that freedom for good, standing in harm’s way for all those who are feeling overwhelmed by life’s burdens or who are subject to oppression and the abuse of power in our world. As priests to one another, led by the Great High Priest and trusting in God’s grace and love, may we find strength to stand in the river for one other.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ John Calvin,(Institutes of Christian Religion, Book 2, Ch, 15, section 6). P. 502.