

Dip Your Toes In; God Will Do the Rest
Joshua 3:7-17
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I've said it before, and I'll say it again, that you should be suspicious of, and worried about, any pastor or any church that does not talk about or ask for your money on a regular basis, since to do so would indicate the neglect of your spiritual well-being. You should run screaming from a church that does not strongly encourage you to give of your financial resources both as a response to God's grace, and as a spiritual discipline. A church that does not ask for your money is a church that understands even less about the stewardship of the mysteries of God, and the stewardship of God's grace than it does about the stewardship of God's money.

So now you know where I am going with this sermon. You should also know that the doors at the back of the church have just been locked and so if you want to leave now, you'll have to come through me here up front. Not that I'll stop you. It's just that everyone will be able to see you. Joking aside, matters of our possessions are not to be taken lightly, but neither are they to be taken negatively; in more ways than one, stewardship is not a four letter word, but in fact is one of the greatest blessings to a Christian's spiritual growth. Today I am not going to ask for your money. I'm just going to remind that God does, and why.

This evening, I want to walk the talk about taking seriously this part of your spiritual life by taking a look at our man Joshua and what God did on the banks of the River Jordan. As we heard from Joshua, these events about which we just heard took place after those 40 long years in the wilderness following the escape from Egypt. Their fearless leader Moses has died, the people are looking forward to a place to end their journey, but it is harvest time and the banks of the River Jordan, which they must cross before they can enter that promised land flowing with milk and honey, are flooded, making the passage across a fearful proposition. But God has a plan, a plan to get them through the waters, and a plan for leading the people home. You see, the promised land is God's gift of life to the people. They have come out of Egypt, a place of death. They have come out of the wilderness, a place of death. And now they have come to the edge of life.

And so God bids Joshua to call together priests to carry the ark to the water's edge, and step in so that the soles of their feet are wet, and then the mighty power of God takes over and the waters upstream are blocked and the waters downstream dry up and the priests carry the ark to the center of the riverbed and hold it there while all the people pass by. Once again, God has done the miraculous by holding back the waters that separate freedom and bondage. The people will go on to occupy that land flowing with milk and honey and the rest is, as they say, history.

Now that is a very nice story, but it raises some interesting questions. Besides the fact that it would make the story considerably less dramatic if they had

waited until the dry season to cross, when the river was not so high, the more important question is this: why do you suppose the priests had to stand in the water? Wouldn't it have been enough for them to come to the river's edge with that ark and wait for God to do God's thing upstream? Wouldn't it even have been enough for the priests to simply hold the ark in the air until all had passed by, rather than getting their feet wet first? Well, we'll never know for sure but here's my theory. If you remember the story of the first parting of the waters when the Hebrews were escaping from Pharaoh, God commands Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his arm and once he has done so, God began the wind to blow and the waters to part. In that story too, God did not need Moses to accomplish what needed to be done, but God called him to take part, to be the visible sign of the wonder God was about to do. The human being whom God called to lead the people into freedom was an integral part of God's plan for their future. In the hand and staff of Moses were the power of God. In the plagues before the Exodus, time after time, God would say, "Moses, stretch out your hand and let hail fall, stretch out your hand and let locusts descend." Through the outstretched hand of Moses, God's power was displayed, God's plan went forward.

Fast forwarding forty years we find the Israelites in possession of the law, the ten commandments contained in the ark of the covenant. And we find them standing on the banks of the Jordan, and we see the beginning of a new sign of God's presence with them. From here forward, the ark, rather than the hand and

staff of Moses, shall go before the people leading them into battle and conquest, first at Jericho and then beyond. In the ark, you see, was the law, the very life of the people. And so in a way similar to how God used Moses, God here uses the priests from the tribe of Levi to lead the people from bondage to freedom. Their wet feet, like Moses outstretched hands, are the sign of the wonder God was about to do.

I want to suggest that even though God doesn't need us to do amazing things, God wants us to be a part of them, each of us a part of God's unfolding of human history, each of us a sign of the wonder that God does on a regular basis. Clearly, God knows that we can't do it alone, that we can't escape from Pharaoh, that we can't stop rivers from flowing, that we can't even figure out how to love one another on a regular basis. And that's why God only asks for the feet of the priests to be dipped into the swollen Jordan. God doesn't ask the whole of the Hebrew nation to throw themselves in, making a blockade of bodies to stop the flow of the mighty Jordan. Instead, God calls for the priests to lead the people by stepping forward in faithfulness and into the water. God takes the little we have to offer, the little we *can* do, and then takes care of the rest. God is the one who stops the river, God is the one who does amazing things. But...God does call us to be an integral part of God's activity.

Throughout the last few weeks, you have been hearing about Consecration Sunday which is the day when we answer the question, "What percentage of my

income is God calling me to give to the ministry of Christ through this church,” recognizing that God takes what we offer and does wonders with it. Despite Jesus’ suggestion to the rich young ruler that we part with *all* of our worldly resources, which you may feel free to do next Sunday, we affirm that God calls us to give a portion, a percentage, of what we have received, in a response of gratitude, and I daresay, as a sign of the wonders that we know God is doing in the world. Like Moses when he stretched out his arm, and like the priests when they dipped their toes in the water, we trust in God’s promises when we offer what we have and what we are called to give, knowing that God is always leading us from bondage to freedom, from the wilderness to a place of safety and security. God doesn’t ask us to do it all. God asks us to participate.

Biblically speaking, the part of our income we are called to give is called the tithe – one tenth of our income, and not just one-tenth, but the first one-tenth, also called the first fruits. God calls us to give the best of what we have to offer, not what is left over after we have used the best part for ourselves. Perhaps you know people who tithe, or give ten percent, simply because the Bible says so. “Because the Bible says so” is a very fine motive indeed, but it is not nearly as convincing for most people as having experienced profoundly the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and having seen just how richly their lives are blessed by offering to God the best of what they have. Their individual gifts don’t, in and of themselves, accomplish the wonders that God does in the world. But they are like the dipping of their toes

into the water so that God can do the rest. The miracle in our story from Joshua is not the holding back of the waters. No, the miracle is that God takes our little steps and does so much more with them, indeed, leading us to life itself, for that is what Canaan was to the Israelites. Dipping our toes in is our little and symbolic, but necessary, part. We have to be willing to enter the water that God is going to part. We have to trust just enough to enter the water. God will do the rest.

In the coming week before Consecration Sunday, as you reflect on the question, “What percentage of my income is God calling me to give,” I would invite you to take into consideration this story from Joshua, and if you’ve never given to the church on a regular basis, dip your toes in and see how good it feels to give, and God will do the rest. If you’ve never before filled out an estimate of giving card, dip your toes in the water, fill one out next week, and God will take care of the rest. If you’ve estimated your giving in the past but you’ve not done it on a percentage, proportionate basis, dip your toes in, start somewhere above 2%, try five percent, and God will do the rest. If you have been giving on a percentage basis, dip your toes in and take one or two steps up, increasing your percentage toward ten percent, and God will do the rest. And if you’ve been tithing, dip your toes in and don’t stop there, and God will do the rest.

If you look around at all our congregation is, and does in the way of ministry and mission, you’ll see evidence of blessing and abundance, and you’ll see evidence of faithfulness that has responded in gratitude. We’ve not done it on our

own, but we've dipped our toes in and we're called to keep on dipping them in. In a few minutes, we will gather for the Lord's Supper, and our responding to the invitation to Christ's table is yet another way of dipping our toes in, a sign that God is once again about to do wonders in our lives, by revealing to us in the sacrament yet more about the grace and gift of Jesus Christ. May we dip our toes in in every area of our lives, and especially in responding to God's grace. Amen.