

## Walking by Faith: Daring to Commit

### Joshua 4:1-7

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, November 18, 2001

### Real Audio (3 MB)

Today is Commitment Sunday in our church. It is a day when we take a step of faith, demonstrating to God and ourselves that we have learned something in the wilderness.

It has been forty years since the Hebrews left Egypt and entered the long, hard road through the desert. Every one of these last forty years has been spent in transformation, as the people were changed from frightened runaway slaves to free men and women. The greatest lessons in freedom always involved faith in God. Moses has died, and Joshua has taken on the mantle of leadership. At long last the only thing separating the Hebrews from the Promised Land is the Jordan River, which is so high it has overflowed its banks.

As the Hebrews stood on the banks of the Jordan, my hunch is that many of them were wondering if God would do it again. They had heard their parents tell the story of the Red Sea crossing time and time again. They certainly knew all the details of the dramatic exodus. So they wanted to know if God would do the same thing for them at the Jordan River he had done for their parents at the Red Sea? Would he miraculously part the swollen waters so they could enter the Promised Land?

To their delight Joshua sent word down through the ranks that God would do the miracle again. The barrier between them and his promises would be divided. But as Joshua kept talking, the details of this water crossing were a little different from the last one. This time, he said, the priests of the people were told to lead the people into undivided water.

Don't you think that as the priests started walking toward this large swollen river, they began to wonder just how carefully Joshua had listened to Moses? "This isn't the way it used to be done." "Moses would have never come up with this plan." "We've never done it this way before!" "First God is supposed to divide the water. Then we walk through."

No, that was then. This is now. Now, God expects the Hebrews to have learned something over the last forty years. Specifically, he expects them to walk by faith. Our text tells us that it wasn't until the soles of the priests' feet touched the Jordan River that "the waters flowing down were cut off and stood in a single heap." That is what it means to take a step of faith.

Some of you are new to the faith, but most of us have been at this journey for a while. Something should have happened to you along the way. Something transforming.

Your journey with God began by sheer grace. Like the Hebrews standing at the Red Sea, your journey started when you wanted to escape something that was chasing you: hell, loneliness, alcoholism, heartache, meaninglessness. Then, God made it easy. The waters parted and you ran through them because you had no choice. Behind you there was only the old slavery. You didn't know what was ahead but it had to be better, so you passed through the waters and claimed your baptism. You began the journey of faith.

Now that you have been on the journey with God for a while, however, he expects you to have learned to have faith in his faithfulness. You're not at the Red Sea anymore. Now you are standing on the banks of the Jordan before any miracles have shown up, with a call to move forward into undivided waters. It takes a lot of faith to be that committed to God's calling. Right.

Faith means trusting when you haven't seen the miracle yet. We haven't been called to live by miracles. We have been called to live by the faith we have learned along the way. If you are facing a great challenge

in your health, home, or work, don't assume God will part the waters for you before you have to act. You may have to take on a battle, make a move, undergo surgery, or take a risk. If you are called to a great mission in life, whether that mission is ridding the world of terrorism or raising a child, don't assume it will be easy just because God called you to this mission. In fact, if God called you to the mission, assume it will be hard. It'll always be hard enough to require faith. As this story illustrates, the miracle will still come. But not until you start walking.

We are told that the priests were carrying the Ark of Covenant on their backs. As they stepped into the waters, and watched it divide, the priests then stood in the midst of the riverbed with the Ark of the Covenant while all the people passed by on dry ground. This Ark was a very ornate box that was fashioned into the chair of God. It was the symbol of his presence that traveled with the people, especially when they are passing through deep water. This is why God always expects the people to expect miracles as they walk forward. Because he is in their midst.

Centuries later, when the Hebrews were passing through the deep waters of exile, the prophet Isaiah invoked the memory of this Jordan River crossing in providing God's words, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you..." (Isaiah 43:2) And centuries after that when the Gospel writer Mark introduces us to Jesus Christ, where do we meet our Savior but as he is being baptized in the middle of the Jordan River? Mark knew this was no ordinary baptism. This was the revelation of God in our midst. It was the Savior who had come to take his stand in the midst of the high waters. Even his name Jesus is the same as the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning Savior.

So when the waters seem high in a world that has become very threatening, we will keep walking forward because by the Holy Spirit, that Savior is still in our midst. Remember that this week when you read the newspapers. Remember there is a Savior who can be found in the anthrax-infested offices, in stressed-out hospital corridors and classrooms, and in the home that has more hurt than love. Wherever the waters are deep, he can be found. Your job is just to keep moving. His saving miracles will appear, but not a second before they need to.

After the Hebrews crossed over to the other side of the Jordan, God told Joshua to instruct twelve men, from each of the twelve tribes, to take a large stone from the middle of the riverbed and carry it to the other side. From those stones they built a memorial to remember the faithfulness of God.

Now this is fascinating to me. The people have entered the land, but they have hardly conquered it. There are a lot of battles with giants waiting up ahead. Why build a memorial now? In Washington, D.C. we have lots of monuments and memorials, but we always wait until the war is over to build them. Imagine trying to get a movement going now to construct a monument for the war in Afghanistan? We're just now getting around to the WWII monument. Nobody builds a monument before the battles even start. It would take a lot of faith in the outcome to do something like that. Which was exactly God's point.

All that the Hebrews have really done at this point is cross over. But that is quite a bit. By crossing over they have left behind the only life they knew in the desert. They have determined to stop searching and wandering. And they have committed themselves to the dream they were given. Do they have a clue about how they are going to possess that which they have entered? No. But they have committed themselves to the dream. And that is worth remembering with a memorial, because the road ahead will be difficult.

We tend to think that if we can just make it to the Promised Land, all your troubles will be over. But you never want to confuse the Promised Land with Paradise. There is still a hard road to take even after you arrive in the place where you are called to be. When you were in the desert of unemployment, you thought you would be happy if only you could make it to the promised land of having a job. But then you discovered the hard work was succeeding in the job. When you were dating, you thought marriage was the Promised Land. But then you had your wedding, you crossed over, and the hard work began. When you were in college, you thought life would be so wonderful if you could just get out of that wasteland university. But after you crossed the Jordan, you got sentimental about school.

Just because what you are doing is hard, it doesn't mean that it isn't right, good, and even sacred work.

But you can't keep flirting with it. You can't just stick a toe in the Jordan. As hard as it is, I can guarantee you won't see any miracles until you cross over and commit yourself to the calling at hand.

Nothing worthwhile is ever accomplished without commitment. Will you succeed in the commitment? Certainly not until you make it. Will we ever truly rid the world of terrorism? Certainly not without committing ourselves to the cause at great cost. As miraculous as that seems, it will never happen without our commitment. Will this church fulfill its calling to be a city of light set on a hill during a time of great anxiety? Certainly not without you and me committing ourselves to the cause. It'll cost a lot.

Today we are inviting you to commit some of your finances to the church's ministry. We hope you are planning to make a significant commitment. Because unless we all make the commitment, the church will never see the miracles of what God can do here.

The most significant commitment is not with your money but your identity. If you commit to being a steward, you are saying God already owns everything you are holding. You are just his financial manager. So the real question is how much of God's money are you being called to commit to God's church? Now it is time to answer that question.

This commitment is between you and the Lord. It is your opportunity to cross over, to write your name down, and sign on to this ministry. And it is your memorial to the faithfulness of God in the past and in the future.

God is not on the other side of the river waiting to see if you will make it. He is found in the midst of your greatest obstacles, and he is waiting to show you the most miraculous things. If you just commit to moving ahead, before long your fear will turn to Thanksgiving.

Almighty God, clearly you have committed yourself to us. May we respond with steps of faith that commit us to seeing the miracles of tomorrow. Amen.