

WHEN THE PRIESTS' FEET ARE WET

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Joshua 3:7-4:7; Revelation 7:9-17

In the movie *Schindler's List*, at the end of the film, a parade of people descend upon a place where, when they arrive, the film turns from black and white to color. It is the grave of Oskar Schindler, the man who saved so many Jewish prisoners from death by employing them in his factory.

In reality the people are descendants of Schindler's Jews (as they are described in the legend on the screen). Each one draws closer to the grave. And one by one these people leave a stone, until Schindler's grave is covered in stones.

There are 6,000 Jewish descendants of the people that Oskar Schindler saved in Poland during World War II and these people came in gratitude to mark the grave of a righteous man and to remember that it was his bravery and humanity that saved the lives of so many people. He showed the way for those who in gratitude remember him.

In the story we read from the book of Joshua, after the people have crossed over the Jordan with all of the echoes of that crossing over of the Red Sea that Moses so long before had traversed, the Israelites took twelve stones and placed them on the other side of the river, *cairns* to mark a holy place on the far side where they would now live into a *promised* and *promising* new land. The cairns became a witness that God had made good on a promise to dwell with the people and sojourn with them across the river and through the desert. I don't know if this is the earliest origin of honoring the memory of those who have gone before, placing a stone of remembrance at a burial site, but I know in scripture it is a distinct marker for the faithful who crossed the Jordan that day.

If there are echoes of Moses' crossing the Red Sea in our mind, there are meant to be such echoes. "Crossing over" is a holy act, an expression of faith, a step into the void that only God can fill. It is an act that lives into the future, claiming that what happens next has the past in it, but is boldly and bravely new as well.

There is a granular detail in the story that is fascinating, a difference between the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan even though both represent a step into the uncharted and unknown.

A few weeks ago, I preached about the crossing of the Red Sea, and the courage that it took for the first person to step into the water and instead find a dry path, dry enough to pass through and escape the Egyptians.

But here in this second crossing at the Jordan under Joshua's leading, Joshua is instructed by God to choose twelve strong men who will carry the ark across the river into the new life, and who will lead the way for God's people to the other side.

Unlike the Red Sea, the Jordan is a rushing water, a torrent that in springtime overflows its banks, raging with water melting from Mt. Hermon. There is no dry land between the Israelites' toes this time, as there had been for their grandparents at the Red Sea. It was more like Houston in the wake of the rushing waters and overflowing banks of Hurricane Harvey.

There they were, those twelve freshly minted priests with the Ark of the Covenant held high on their shoulders trying to keep it dry. Trying to stay upright. Their feet wet from the river flowing between their toes, inching up their waistline as they edged into the water, and finally reaching their arm pits.

The waters do not abate until the priests carrying the ark step into the active current. So different from their forebears whose feet never touched water, but whose God made a dry way for them in the midst of the sea.

And therein lies not just a detail, but a notable marker for a people who on All Saints Sunday remember with love those who have already crossed over and who have gone before us in faith. We remember this story of crossing over and place a stone of memory, a cairn to mark a holy site where God's promise, we believe, is fulfilled.

And just to make the point that the way was long and the journey hard that preceded the crossing of the Jordan, we need to remember that God's promise of a Promised Land dates a long way back, not just to Joshua, and not just to Moses, but all the way back to Abram. Remember? Great, great, great, great grandpa Abram?

Abram received a promise of land and a great many descendants at a time when we were but an improbable gleam in God's eye. Abram's proof of God's faithfulness to this promise was simply God's word, and that to a man a hundred years old. But God has a journey in mind for Abram. God tells Abram "lech lecha," just go. Go to a land that I will show you, a place you have not yet seen. Never mind you doubt it. Never mind you can't see it. Never mind it's beyond imagining. Just go. Be gone! Be on your way and I will meet you there!

Abram, renamed Abraham makes his way according to God's promise, but it's not just promise and then fulfillment. Abraham's descendants are a nomadic folk, wayfarers and wanderers and they do not stay in one place for long.

For a while they live in Egypt, first in comfort and then in slavery.¹ But God hears their cries of suffering and injustice, God leads them to liberation. They cross the Red Sea but they wander still, an entire generation who cannot find their way home. They all die, even the great Moses who led them out of slavery dies, before the promise is fulfilled. In a touching scene, having come so far, Moses sends out spies to scout the way ahead, and they return to say that it is a lost cause. The challenges of reaching where they are meant to go are too great.

And while Moses does get to see a glimpse of the land from Mt. Pisgah, it is but a fleeting sight and he is buried with only that much of the promise to Abraham in his pocket. Old Moses buried in an unmarked grave so that no one would lift him up as greater than any other.

So if the story seems convoluted, sometimes repetitious, circling in its movement, there is a good reason why. Because it is the story of life and how God's promises to us in this life are fulfilled.

What we learn is that life is difficult. Paths wander sometimes, the way is long and the journey hard on the passage to the Promised Land. It is not a direct route, and sometimes obstacles appear and discouragements are met.

Like the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, Israel must get from where it is to where it must go by passing through the waters. At the Jordan the crossing is hard work, the priests are knee deep, no *waist* deep in the water, the ark on their shoulders, carrying the presence of God with them. This is not an easy crossing. The path is uncertain, but the people step forward in faith, which is about all they have at that moment – the water so high. And the point? The point is that:

The promises of God seldom arrive conveniently, as if gliding effortlessly over an uncomplicated terrain. Abram had to go and see. The people Israel had to wander and struggle for forty years. Along the way they lost the scent, building a golden calf and pushing their way against God's way. What Israel learns in its wanderings is that life is hard. Paths wander, the way is long and the journey difficult on the passage to the Promised Land. And sometimes, no, a lot of the time, you just have to step out in faith, trusting that the God of promise will make good. And you will not be certain that you have done the right thing because the water is waist deep, and cold, and there is weight on your shoulders.

The author Lauren Winner writes of this experience of the high waters of life, "Sometimes you have to get into the river before it will be parted for you; [she writes] step out into the void – the darkness before a way forward can be found; jump out of the airplane before a parachute can open."²

Sometimes you have to do what our fathers and mothers in faith have done, which is to just go, trusting that the God who has seen us this far will see us all the way home, even to the Promised Land.

And what does this have to do with All Saints? Well on All Saints Sunday we remember and celebrate the destination that is promised to us and we remember those who have gone there before us. We stand supported and strengthened by the everlasting arms that bear us up even when our legs are weary. And here from this place where we are, where the ark is lifted up as a sign that God is with us, just as God has promised, we thankfully remember those who have come before us and who now are beyond all pain, all tears, all sadness, all sorrow.

What *they* know, and we are still learning is that the way to the Promised Land is not always easy. In fact, the way is long and the journey difficult, and the currents are strong. What was not promised to them, those who have gone before us, nor is it promised to us, is that the way would be easy. But as we heard in the text there are markers along the way that they have left to remind us that they have done what we must do. They have left cairns to guide our path, like blue blazes on the mountain trail, stones by the side of the road to lead us to the Promised Land.

In ancient cultures it was assumed that if you were poor, suffered illness, lived with a disease, contracted leprosy, or misfortune befell you, *you* caused it. It was your moral failure, or your parents' moral failure. The dynamics of shame or honor were expressed in the condition that you bore in life. But in faith, in the way that Jesus loved and welcomed the poor, the outcast, the leper, the ill, the otherwise unwelcome, we have come to see through him who suffered and died on a cross... that poverty, illness, misfortune, suffering are not *causal* in simplistic terms, but rather are influenced by many factors including acts of nature and willfully poor governance, ignorance and simple human limitation, which may in fact be contrary to God's benevolent love and kindness toward us.

I was very sorry that the President chose to describe Sayfullo Saipov as an "animal." A friend who knew him put it better. "The monsters got inside him and got the better of him." There is no getting around the fact that Mr. Saipov's view of reality is warped and evil. I am not afraid to say nor do I think it very daring to say that his acts of hatred rise from hell and not from heaven.

And if the God he worships is pleased with him, then I think he has a god created in his own image and not the God of Islam nor of the God I know.

We have already seen the deeds of evil in raw forms in Nice, and Barcelona, and Paris, and Orlando, and San Bernardino, and on and on to get the point that there are some people in this world who think that murdering innocents out for a spin on a Citi Bike is good sport and their personal god's will. But let me say that among the imams and religious leaders of Islam whom I know, that is not Allah's will.

The truth is that any poor misguided soul with evil in his heart can rent a truck and drive through the Bike Path on the West Side, or pilot two planes into the World Trade Center and prove nothing more than that he is misguided, believing in a God of vengeance and hatred whom no one who truly loves God would want to follow, especially our Islamic neighbors. So why stoop to the level of Mr. Saipov by calling him an animal and bypassing the judicial system of accountability rather than to score the base point of demeaning the humanity of Mr. Saipov and of us all? We as Christians are called to a higher path, and a difficult way, but it is a better way than to give in to the animal instincts within ourselves.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, pray for those who spitefully use us, even forgave from the cross those who murdered him. It's hard being a Christian, walking through the torrent with all that weight on our shoulders. But if we cannot live a life more exemplary of love and mercy than Mr. Saipov's life, we are of all people most to be pitied, because we will have taken the Promised Land of God's love and reign and replaced it with our vengeance and hatred. I do not want to live into a Promised Land that has so little hope and whose God is so like a golden calf of our own making, petty, impulsive, vengeful, full of rage, anger, and caprice.

So what is it like to live facing the Promised Land, to live and to die in the hope that God is faithful to God's loving, healing, peaceful, encouraging promises?

Many of you know that I had an outpatient procedure a week ago Friday and what was to be a half-day experience became a four day hospitalization. Nothing much went right, too much loss of blood, lightheadedness, well... you didn't come for an organ recital today, but rather for some word of hope on All Saints Communion.

So I won't forget that... Let me just say that over three of those four days, I was placed in a four patient room in a step down unit. And so you get to see and observe the care and condition of other people as well as yourself. My three roommates were in one way or another sojourners with me toward the Promised Land, working their way, as are we all toward God's love, mercy, healing and peace.

One man across the way had stomach cancer and was in the hospital for testing.

I kept wondering, if I had the diagnosis of stomach cancer, could I be as positive as he seemed to be?

A man was in the bed to my right. His wife and his son visited him. He spoke softly to them, and they to him. It seemed like that was the way they were in the midst of the raging torrent that threatened to separate them. Quiet, they were. Sometimes you are quiet when you are working to cross over to the Promised Land.

And across from me was an older woman, who was surrounded and "vigiled" by a group of other women. It appeared from what I saw and heard that she was the matriarch of this Eastern European and Jewish clan. She was a holocaust survivor, I overheard my last day, and her doctor spoke in Russian or Slavic, and he marshalled action among the attending staff by saying crisply, "She survived the fire of the holocaust, and we're not going to let her drown in water now."

I thought about my own mortality in the course of those four days. I was weak, but not in the same dire state as the men next to me, nor the woman across from me. We were each of us nonetheless, sojourners on the way to the Promised Land, the land where suffering is over and God's love and healing and peace abide. I trust I will be able to regain strength in time and there are years ahead for me.

Maybe it was the week in the hospital that opened me up, but I got to thinking about those we remember today and do so with love, taking a cairn as they passed our way and leaving it for us to inspire our journey, marking a place in our hearts where they and God are together.

This is my last All Saints Sunday as your pastor, and I think of all those saints who have gone before in these past sixteen years, those who have left cairns in the path, and how I draw strength from them. Peter Wallace, Gloria Mellon, Mary Macnab, Stuart Buice, John Perry, Jeanette Einstein, Amelia Sheffs-Bevington, Ron Doerfler, Susan Madigan, Gene Cannava, Virginia Thoren, Mal Crawford, Susan Makinen, Bill Claytor, Florence Miller, Steve Davis. And I need to especially mention Denise Jackson whose picture is still on my tac board near the computer in my office, where so many of all your pictures are – Denise, whom I used to visit in her little garret next to the firehouse, where in better days she used to sunbathe on the roof, nude, and peer down and wave at the hunky firemen lifting weights on their roof below her, to both the firefighters' and Denise's delight.

When I visited her she was wracked with pain shaking her hands to distract her from the combination of pain and neuropathy that made her fight to get to the other side; such a battle.

Each one of them showed me, showed all of us, that while the Promised Land lies ahead of us, the getting to that Promised Land is not easy. It is, in this life, a place where holocausts occur, and men who have created their own god drive trucks on bike paths, and cancer tries to rob people of hope, and accidents occur, and there is sometimes weeping and sorrow and chemo and radiation and other friends who leave us too soon.

But the promise on which we stand, and the faith that sustains our hope is that God will meet us on the other side if we will only follow the cairns gently laid by those who have gone before us.

So let's be on our way, *lech lecha*, to a place that God will show us. Do not stop going just because the water is high and the way is hard. Feet in the water, ark on the shoulders, cairns ahead to guide us. Perhaps even from this table we can glimpse it from afar.

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¹ I am borrowing from the insight of Doug King whose Moveable Feast paper on this text is most helpful.

² Lauren Winner, So,;," Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis, HarperOne, New York, 2012, p. 190.