

Sermon: "Crossing Over"

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 3:7-17, I Thessalonians 2:9-13

All Saints' Remembrance Sunday, November 5, 2023

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading on this All Saints' Remembrance Sunday is Joshua 3:7-17. Following Moses' death, the people cross over into the Promised Land led by Joshua in another miraculous parting of the sea. They cross over without Moses, however they have the law to guide them and the Ark of the Covenant to accompany them, symbolizing God's presence. The God who created humanity from the dust of the earth and breathed life into them, the God who formed the Israelite people like a Potter molds the clay provides a way. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*7 The Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. 8 You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, "When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan." 9 Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God." 10 Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: 11 the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. 12 So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. 13 When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap." 14 When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. 15 Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, 16 the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 17 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. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is I Thessalonians 2:9-13. We continue from last week's reading in Paul's first letter and oldest existing New Testament document. Paul shares his recollection of their time together and, in his absence, Paul calls the Thessalonians to remain faithful and to live lives worthy of God. Paul's prayer, like Moses,' is that the faith he shared would become their own and God's word would be written upon their hearts. Listen now for the Word of God.

*9 You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. 11 As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, 12 urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into God's own kingdom and glory. 13 We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. Amen.*

The sermon title: "Crossing Over"

*The Text: Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. Joshua 3:16b*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, as we reflect on the crossings in each of our lives, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you, our guide and Pilot. Amen.

On this All Saints' Remembrance Sunday, we gather as a faith community to affirm the "priesthood of all believers," one of the major tenants of the Reformation. What began with Martin Luther posting 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany that "Hallowed Eve" of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, culminated in John Calvin's theological affirmation that all God's children are "priests" or "saints," equally called to lead within the church through the manner in which we live our lives. All Saints' Remembrance provides an opportunity for Westminster to honor the memory of members who have died in the past year. Our Memorial Garden affirms the church's ongoing relationship with those who have gone before us. Along with those whom we honor today, many of us are also remembering our own loves ones who have "crossed over."

My father "crossed over" the same month I became the Pastor of Westminster in October 2013. It was an exciting and tumultuous time full of change and transition and I was overwhelmed at the prospect of losing my father, friend, and confidant during this time. He never saw Westminster, although I shared photos with him in his hospital room the weekend after Peter and I moved my books and belongings into the Pastor's Study.

My father knew that this call was beyond my wildest imagination and a dream come true. He believed in me and was an advocate like none other, even when the obstacles along the way seemed overwhelming. Although my father was no Moses and Springfield is not exactly the Promised Land, I resonate with our first Scripture reading because my coming into my own as a pastor coincided with the death of my father. I was asked to "cross-over" without him. We celebrated his life in a memorial service the day before my installation. His niche in Westminster's Memorial Garden is both a sustaining comfort and a source of strength.

I first became familiar with Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, *Crossing the Bar*, when an elder at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church requested it for his memorial bulletin. Alfred Lord Tennyson was Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and remains one of the most popular British poets. He wrote *Crossing the Bar* in 1889 three years before his own death. The metaphor in the poem compares death with crossing the "sandbar" between the river of life and the ocean that lies beyond death, the "boundless deep," to which we return. The traveler in Tennyson's poem crosses over with a quiet confidence. The Pilot, who adeptly navigates the shallow waters over the sandbar between life and death and whom the traveler hopes to see face to face, is a metaphor for God. Tennyson explained, "The Pilot has been on board all the while, but in the dark he was unaware of the Divine and Unseen who is always guiding us."

Sunset and evening star, And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,  
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,

Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell, And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.

Today we honor those who have crossed the bar from this life to the next, we recognize the mystery of what lies on the other side, and we affirm the God we hope to meet face to face whose mercy is wider than the sea.

The notion of crossing over is a recurrent metaphor within Hebrew Scripture. It describes a physical act; however, it alludes to a deeper meaning. "Crossing over" often symbolizes a major transition and the forging of a new path in life. When one crosses over, one leaves the old life behind and goes beyond its preconceived understandings. Time and time again in Scripture, one is invited to "cross-over" certain emotional, psychological, or spiritual limitations and to stretch oneself in every manner possible to live a life worthy of God. We are grateful for the legacy of Westminster whose abolitionist founders in 1835 crossed over the divide of racial injustice.

We pray for insight and resolve as people of faith to "crossover" and move beyond the antisemitism and islamophobia flowing from the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Two weeks ago, the Clerk of Session Tom Owen, Reverend Choi, and I signed and sent letters to the worship communities of our Jewish and Muslim friends in Springfield to express our support and solidarity in this time of heightened rhetoric, unspeakable loss, and personal threat.

Long ago, Abram crossed into the land of Canaan embracing monotheism. Later in Jewish history, the Israelites cross the Red Sea to escape the bondage of slavery. Forty years after that, they cross the Jordan gifted with the law and the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence in their lives holding back the waters that would otherwise overwhelm them.

It was the same Jordan River that Christ crossed centuries later to be baptized as he began his ministry reaching beyond the religious boundaries of his day. The image of the parting water in the crossing over has become a symbol of baptism in the beginning of each of our faith journeys.

In Jesus Christ, we have experienced the presence of God anew, a God who would cross over and join us in our humanity to share the ebb and flow and tides of life, and who then crossed over again conquering death by dying on a cross.

As we consider the waters God invites us to cross on our faith journeys, may we do so courageously and adeptly, heeding the inspirational words of the Apostle Paul to *lead a life worthy of God*, the God whose face we hope to see when we have crossed the bar. So be it. Amen.