

“An Untraveled Road”

In first chapter of the Book of Joshua we are told that after Moses dies God chooses Joshua to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan. Two spies are sent out into the land, and they come back with the report that they can take the land. The narrative continues in chapter 3 of Joshua. The Israelites get up early in the morning and travel to the Jordan River, where they camp before crossing over into the land. Officers go through the camp and give these instructions: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, *for you have not passed this way before*” (Joshua 3:3-4a).

Notice the words: “for you have not passed this way before” (Joshua 3:4). Isn’t that a good text for New Year’s Eve day! Every one of us here has this in common: None of us has yet lived in 2018! We haven’t gone down that road yet! That’s new territory!

For some of us, going into a new year is not a big deal. January 1st is just another day. Day at a time, we say. But isn’t it true that New Year’s Eve we tend to think a little more about what lies ahead of us in the new year? For instance, for some of us, life is much different today, December 31st, than it was at the beginning of the year. A lot has happened.

As we get older, we may even wonder, “Gee, will I even *be here* next year at this time!” My mother will be 97 in March. Our one son and his wife recently visited her; she told them this will be her last Christmas. Kraig and Sarah’s response was: “Grandma, you’ve been saying that for years.” I’ve often said to my mom that I may be gone before her.

Sometimes we can be apprehensive as we think about a New Year ahead. For one thing, the world isn’t a safe place! I’m not sure it ever has been, but with all the mass shootings and acts of terrorism we have seen in recent years, where are you safe anymore? Donald Trump has put a lot of people on edge! He’s not your typical politician! Sort of a loose cannon, unpredictable. Most Democrats, I guess, are convinced he’ll blunder his way into some world catastrophe and drag us along with him. I have a hunch that even some Republicans are a bit nervous about the guy!

Then you have these occasional dire predictions that the world economy is going to collapse, or the stock market crash, etc. etc. Hopefully, very few, if any, of these doomsday forecasts will ever materialize! Anyone remember Y2K? Those “experts” warning that as 1999 ended and the year 2000 began, computers would go crazy, causing airliners to crash, along with all the banking institutions and the entire money system. Did it all happen? No. We quietly eased into the 21st century.

On a more personal level, some of us may have some real fears for the coming year. Health issues. Finances. Family members or friends we’re very concerned about.

Joshua tells the people about to go into Canaan: “for you have not passed this way before.” They were going into the unknown, and it was a bit scary.

But, remember, this untraveled road was *the land God promised!* It was the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey!

Can we think of the New Year this way: There's a "promised land" out there! We don't have to go into the New Year with a negative attitude. God wants *good* for us in 2018! Joshua says to the Israelites: "Tomorrow, the Lord will do wonders among you" (Joshua 3:5). God was going to defeat their enemies, and finally, give them their own land! After 40 years wandering in the desert, following 400 years of slavery in Egypt! Don't you think the Israelites were pumped and raring to go!

What's your "promised land" for 2018? What are you hoping for? Maybe better health? A better job? A better relationship with a family member? A greater sense of purpose in life? Don't sell God short – the heavenly Father wants good things for us! God wants to do some exciting things in you and through you in the year ahead! If you're bored with life, if your hopes or dreams are nonexistent, or go no further than your nose, it's not God's fault! That's not what God wants!

Can we begin to look on 2018 as an entrance into the "promised land" – with new joys, new blessings, new ways to see the Lord at work in our lives! *Can we envision that for this congregation?* Can we hear Joshua say to us, "Tomorrow, the Lord will do wonders among you." I hope so! *There's a "promised land" ahead in 2018 if we only claim it!*

But there are some things we have to do if we're going to get there! We will need preparation. We've got to do our part. We can get some clues by looking at how the Israelites had to prepare themselves in order to enter their promised land.

Joshua 3:1-4a says, "Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. At the end of three days the officers went through the camp and commanded the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before."

This text mentions the Ark of the Covenant. Do you know what that was? It was gold covered wooden chest that contained the 2 tablets on which the 10 Commandments were inscribed, plus (as far as we know) a pot of manna, the rod of Aaron, Moses' brother, and a few other sacred items. Most importantly, it was the *visible symbol of God's presence*. God would go with them into the promised land!

In the same way, God will go with you, and me, into the New Year! We don't have any gold covered wooden chest, but we have something better: we have Jesus! Jesus said to His followers, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). "I will never leave you" – and never means never! If you're a disciple of Jesus, Jesus will be with you every day, hour, and minute of the New Year, no matter what you have to face.

Notice, they were told to follow the Ark of the Covenant (verse 3b). In other words, follow God's presence. We've got to make the effort to *be close to God!* We've got to follow where God leads if we want the New Year to be a year of blessing!

How can we do that? You already know! Prayer (the life line between God and us). Getting into the Bible (rather than ignoring the Bible, or just reading it sporadically). Regular worship and fellowship with others in the church. It's so important to make use of the means of grace the church provides. Frankly, I wish some of you would take an hour out of your Sunday morning to be part of the adult Sunday School class. Get into a small group (we hope to form several more groups). Commit to some sort of once a week study (we hope to start one soon).

Let's read on to the last part of verse 4 in Joshua 3. "Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come any nearer to it." Isn't that strange. Follow the Ark of the Covenant, but at a distance. Don't go any closer than 2,000 cubits (1,000 yards or 3,000 feet). What's that about? **Reverence!** The ark was so sacred, so holy, that you had to keep a distance from it.

We are living in a culture that in many respects has lost a sense of reverence for God. Think of the deluge of profanity in the public arena, taking the Lord's name in vain - in films, TV shows, comedy acts. If you've ever been on a cruise, your cruise line probably hired at least one comedian to entertain the people. In my experience, these comedians do their regular show, then do a late night show "for adults". I've never gone to one of these, but you know what that is: dirty jokes, filthy language, with no respect for Lord or His name.

Then there are the late night talk show hosts, some of whom routinely mock God, Christians, and people of faith.

Singer Kathy Griffin won an Emmy Award several years ago. As she was presented the award, she said this as part of her acceptance speech: "A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus for this award. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this reward than Jesus." Then she went on to say, "Suck it, Jesus. This is my god now."

This is the climate of our culture. How far removed we are from the Israelites, who stayed over half mile away from the Ark of the Covenant, out of fear and reverence for God! If our nation is to have any bright future, and if you and I are to experience the peace and blessing of God in the New Year, a healthy reverence for God is absolutely required!

The story in Joshua continues: "Then Joshua said to the people, 'Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you'" (Joshua 3:5). Sanctify (or consecrate) yourselves! Turn away from evil. Devote yourself to the Lord! Because the Lord wants to do wonders through you! D. L. Moody once remarked, "The world has yet to see what God will do with a (person) fully consecrated to Him."

Do you make New Year's resolutions? I usually don't. But I'm tempted to this year, as a way to

consecrate my life more fully to God. I want to make prayer more a priority. I should go to bed earlier – and get up earlier, so I can spend more time with God in the morning.

Where is God calling you to consecrate yourself in fresh ways to Himself? *Will you consecrate yourself more to this church and ministry?* Go beyond being a “one hour a week in church” Christian? I doubt this church will break out of its spiral of decline unless more of us devote ourselves to the ministry of Christ here.

Joshua 3:6-7 continues: “To the priests Joshua said, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass on in front of the people.’ So they took up the ark of the covenant and went in front of the people. 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.’” God affirms that He will be with Joshua. He had told him that before (Joshua 1:5). Now God says it again.

Let’s hear it again: Jesus will be with us in the New Year. We will not be alone! Say it: “Jesus will be with me throughout the New Year!” No matter what happens, I’m not alone. Jesus is with me.

There is one more part of this story in Joshua 3 we will look at. In order to get into Canaan, the people have to cross the Jordan River. The writer makes it a point to tell us that the waters of the Jordan at that time were high. The river was at flood stage! This flooded river with its surging current presented a great obstacle. How are the Israelites going to cross the Jordan to get into this new territory? God says to Joshua, “Order the priests who are transporting the ark of the covenant that when they reach the edge of the waters of the Jordan River, to stand still with their feet in the water.”

The story then goes on: “So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. 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. 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. 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, 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. 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” (Joshua 3:12-17).

Can you picture this in your mind? The priests bearing the ark are ahead of the people. The river is high and swift. As they step into the water, the waters begin to part, and the people follow, crossing the Jordan on dry ground. What’s this remind you of? Sure – the parting of the Red Sea, as the Israelites are fleeing Egypt, and being saved from Pharaoh’s pursuing army!

We're going to have our Jordan Rivers to cross in the New Year. We don't know what lies ahead, do we? To be human means that bad things will happen. Obstacles. Disappointments. Trials. But God can help us overcome our "Jordan River obstacles"!

Did you notice what had to happen first? The priests had to step into the water before the waters parted! Can't you just see a couple of the priests saying, "I don't want to get my feet wet!" "If God is going to part the waters, I have to see it first. Then I'll get in!" No, you step into the water – then God does the parting!

We are talking about *faith* here. Trust God enough to step into the water *before* the answer comes. So often, we want the waters to part first, then we'll make our move: "I'll donate more and give more when I make more money." "I'll forgive so-and-so someday when I feel more like forgiving." "I'll spend more time with the family when I have more time." "I'll have a daily devotional time when my schedule eases up." "I'll take more of a leadership role in the church when I gain more self-confidence."

No, you step in the water, first. You act, you do it. Then trust God to work. A pastor tells of the time she knelt at the altar of her church as a teenager, when she was struggling over some issue. And a kind-hearted deacon in her church whispered to her: "You take the first step and the Lord will do the rest." Our Visioning Team is going through a book called *Go Big*. The authors of the book suggest that you have to *act like* your church is twice its size before it becomes twice its size! Someone has said: "God often provides no solution to our problems until we trust Him and move ahead with what we know we should do." *What is God wanting you to do to take that first step of faith into the water?*

"For you have not passed this way before" (Joshua 3:4). In a little over 14 hours we will enter the uncertain territory of 2018. It can be our Promised Land of opportunity and blessing! Yes, you and I will have our Jordan Rivers of trouble to cross. But let's claim that God will make it a promised land of blessing for us. And always remember, God will be with you!

A father tells how after moving into a new community, their one son was bullied to the point where he and his wife decided to home school the boy. The worried father says that one day he saw this Scripture on his son's bedroom door, and knew from then on the boy would be fine: "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you" (Isaiah 43:2).

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