

“The Great Crossing”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
November 5, 2023  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
All Saints’ Day Observance

---

I want to invite you to come to the waters with me. First, picture the water at Overpeck park, after days and days of flooding rain. Imagine how swollen it is. How its surface threatens to lap at the bridges crossing it, and its edges extend over the edge of its banks. Think about how the logs that usually jut out, where turtles like to perch, are submerged.

Or maybe you can more easily picture the Meadowlands marshes, at high tide. You know that at low tide you can see pathways through the grasses, or even witness the muddy bottom where egrets stride on their long legs like stilts, bowing down to forage for frogs and salamanders in the wet sand and grasshoppers in the reeds. It is a whole ecosystem that continues despite the urgent rush of i-95 alongside it. But at high tide, deep water flows briskly, and you cannot even see evidence of the grasses it covers.

Now picture the Jordan River. At times it is just a humble stream, but on this day, it is the time of the harvest, and the river overflows its banks. You gather at the edge, watching its swift current. The rush of its flow makes the water you see at this second, gone in the next. In the same way, you think of all that has passed: Your great leader, Moses, has gone— as has his sister Miriam, and his brother Aaron. In fact, all those who had fled Egypt and had witnessed the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea— they have all died in the wilderness, and you are part of the new generation that will begin the next chapter of your history with God.

All you have known of life is the wilderness. And only your people, you with your God. No Egyptians to rule over you. You were homeless, but you were free. What will this new land be, a land already filled with Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites? Will your people become enslaved again? Or will they become the enslavers? Is there another way? Can there be another way? God once promised Abraham, “By your offspring shall *all* the nations of the earth find blessing.” What will that look like, in this new land?

Twelve men move forward, one from each tribe. Priests take hold of the ark— a golden box that holds the sacred covenant, and upon which you understand that God’s glory sits. How can Israel’s most precious possession be the first to enter these rushing waters? You wonder, as you gather your children closer to you.

As the priests’ bare feet touch the water, a chill runs through your feet, too. But instead of your eyes confirming what your mind expects, you notice that their feet have landed on dry ground. The waters from the Jordan have cut off and are standing in a heap.

You have heard the story so many times, as your elders have told, about that miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, that you wonder if your mind might be playing tricks on you, repeating the story that has been ingrained in your head. But no, as the crowds around you funnel into the pathway, you are moving closer, too. You step from the river bank, into its bed and sure enough, your feet touch on dry ground. Their story is your story, too. Although every single person of the last generation has gone, their story continues, and it is you God has called to live faithfully into the next chapter. Even though they are gone, you carry them with you.

The ritualistic crossing of the Jordan River reminds a people that are grieving their leader and their elders that God is still with them. It becomes a foundational story for the people, and it is even the place where Jesus returns to receive his baptism and usher in a new kind of spiritual life.

For any of us, who may be stepping into a new phase of our lives, whether entering a new relationship, starting out in a different career, moving to a new place, grieving a loved one, or even preparing for our own death, this story reminds us that just as God was there for our spiritual ancestors, God will be with us, too.

I do not want to leave unaddressed the one passage that we may find troubling, especially given today's conflicts. The Israelites do not move into an *empty* land; Joshua announces that God would drive out seven populations that *already* lived there. The book of Joshua goes on to describe several graphically violent, militaristic conquests— genocide, even— although biblical scholars raise many doubts as to whether this peasant group of travelers really experienced such triumphant victories as the book of Joshua reports.

Beyond that, I question whether Joshua had it right when he reported that God would drive out all these populations. Maybe Joshua said what he did to give the others courage to step into that rushing river. I know when I have been grieving loved ones, even taking the next step on *dry* ground takes courage for me. Like after my friend Tara died of a sudden cardiac arrest while she was running, everything felt uncertain for me. I asked my friend who is a physician for words that would guarantee that I would never just suddenly die. I would have preferred her to tell me a story of my assured, eternal immortality. That would have given me courage. Instead, she told me that life is uncertain. That I am probably fine at this age, but to also just recognize each day as a gift. I guess that was good advice, too. It taught me to live with vulnerability— and that vulnerability makes me rely more upon the relationships of love I have in life, and it makes me rely more on God.

In the big picture of Israel's story with God, we see that they do eventually gain all the power and privilege of kingship and wealth. But it leads them further and further away from relying on God, as they did in those 40 vulnerable years in the wilderness. In fact, the book of Joshua was actually completed during the time of exile— nearly a thousand years after the events the book reports. In exile, Israel had lost just about everything they had worked to build up. Again, they were left with nothing but their vulnerability and their reliance on God. Again, they needed to return to the water's edge, and contemplate what their next crossing would bring.

Just as the repetition of God meeting God's people at the water's edge gives us comfort in uncertain times, the repetition of the sacred meal we share connects us to the story that God shows up for us. God showed up for us in Jesus Christ, and at his table we are joined with every spiritual ancestor who ate and drank here. So as we prepare to share this communion meal, take time to consider who eats here with us. How did they teach us about what love and about faith? In what ways did they fail to bring forth God's justice and love? Even in their failures, we can know that the grace of God's story is that where they failed, we have the chance to make right.

That is a humbling thought, and lately I have been measuring out my thoughts and even my silence, wondering whether in 30 years, when I look back on my words, my actions, my silence, will I feel proud? Will I feel regret?

But I also know that the grace of God's story does not end with us either; what we fail to achieve or accomplish, another generation will be waiting at the water's edge, for the next crossing; and one day, our spirits will be invoked by another generation, to eat at the Christ's Table with them as they remember and hope for the beloved community.