



November 14, 2004

Joshua 4:1-7  
**Marking a Commitment**  
Commitment Sunday  
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It must have been exciting. For over forty years the Hebrews had been wandering in the desert, but they were now on the banks of the Jordan River about to cross over to the Promised Land. All of the people who were standing there had spent their lives in the desert. They were born along the way in the wilderness sojourn so life in the desert was all they knew. It had been a hard life of aimless wandering with only a vague sense that God was somehow leading them to a better place.

Maybe you also know about the desert. Maybe you have been there a very long time in your relationships, your work, or health. Lots of wandering around through hard, dry places. Along the way you have learned to trust God when trusting wasn't easy, when the miracles were scarce, and when only the vague promises of Scripture were there to guide you through the parade of ordinary days. But you kept going; in part, because you didn't know what else to do and, in part, because you really did believe God was somehow involved in your life.

As St. John of the Cross reminds us, for those who trust God there eventually comes a Dark Night of the Soul when we simply hang on the cross with Jesus while everything else drops off. You may have thought you were even losing God on this long desert journey but you were not. What you were losing was your instrumental use for God. Out in the desert, you just keep facing the most important question of your soul: Will you still follow God if there are no obvious blessings attached? What if it is just God plus nothing? Is the presence of God, alone, enough for you? This is what your grief, your unemployment, your loneliness, even your boredom was really all about. It was about choosing to believe when belief was hard. It was about learning to see that you are never separated from the love of God. Because believing you are loved by a God who is with you is all you need to make it into the Promised Land.

As our text today makes clear, the wilderness may be the hard place where we learn how to trust God. But God never wants anyone to stay there. There comes a time to leave the desert and enter a future filled with hope. There comes a time to cross over.

Joshua is now in leadership of the people, after Moses has died. The Word of the Lord came to Joshua telling him to lead the people toward the swollen waters of the Jordan River-with the priests in front, carrying the Ark of the Covenant. This Ark was an ornate box that served as the chair of God. The priests had been carrying it with poles on their backs. It symbolized God's presence with the people. As He had been with them through their long dry days in the desert, so would He be with them through the mighty waters and into the Promised Land.

You will remember that when the people left Egypt, the waters of the Red Sea were parted first, and then they walked through. This river crossing is different. This time, the waters would not be divided until the priests carrying the Ark stepped into the river. So God expects the people to have learned something over the last forty years. He expects them to know to walk by faith. He expects them to believe in God's commitment to them, and He expects them to demonstrate some commitment to God. "And when the soles of the priests' feet touched the river, the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the Ark of the Covenant." Then all the people crossed over on dry ground while the priests holding the Ark remained in the middle of the river bed.

You must know this isn't just the story of the Hebrews. Maybe it is also the story of your life. Perhaps you are done with the desert. You thought the grief or heartache would kill you and then worried that it wouldn't. You have lost track of the tears and sleepless nights. You had just about settled into this familiar misery when the Word of the Lord finally comes to say, "Enough of this." It is time to cross over, to leave behind despair, and to use the hard lessons you have learned about the faithfulness of God.

Just don't expect God to make it easy to get to the Promised Land. Don't be surprised if there is an obstacle in the way. Do not expect God to part the waters before you enter them. Expect it to be hard – hard enough to require faith to cross over. You are going to have to be as committed to your future as God is. You can always turn back to the desert, but if you are tired of being hurt, then the way to the future is forward. And all that you know is God will be with you.

This river crossing was a pivotal event that remained in the hearts of the Hebrews. Centuries later, when times were hard for them, the prophet Isaiah reminded the people of the word of the Lord. "When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and the rivers will not overwhelm you." God is in your midst. It is enough. When Jesus began his ministry, where does He appear but in the midst of the Jordan. This was the incarnation 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. It is all you need to believe to leave the desert behind and get moving again.

After the Hebrews crossed over to the other side of the Jordan, God told Joshua to tell twelve men, one from each of the twelve tribes, to take a large stone from the middle of the river bed, and carry it to the other side. Then from those stones they built a memorial to remember the faithfulness of God, and the people. 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? Imagine trying to get a movement going now to construct a monument for the way in Iraq. We just got around to the WWII monument last year. 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 crossed over. But that is worth remembering. They have left behind the only life they knew in the desert. They have deter-

mined 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 crossed over and committed themselves to a better future. It is that commitment that will allow them to overcome the challenges that lie ahead.

You never want to confuse the Promised Land with paradise. God's Promised Land, or dreams for your work and relationships may be filled with challenge. The fact that what you are doing is hard, 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 miracle until you cross over and commit yourself to the calling at hand.

Commitment—nothing worthwhile is ever accomplished without commitment. Will you succeed in the commitment? Certainly not until you make the commitment. Will this church fulfill its calling to be a city of light set on a hill? Certainly not without you and me committing ourselves to the cause. Today we are inviting you to commit some of your finances to the church's ministry. But you are not just making a commitment to the church's budget. More importantly, you are committing this church to stop playing it safe, to leave the wilderness behind and cross over into a future filled with hope. Unless you make the commitments, the church will never see the miracles of what God can do here. We are not just fund-raising today. We are declaring that the same God who was in our midst for over a hundred years is the same God who was in our midst during the hard years, and is the same God who will lead us into a new chapter in ministry. Your pledge card is your opportunity to cross over, to write your name down and sign onto this ministry. Together they become stones stacked together as a memorial not just to what has happened, but what can happen when the church lives by faith.

*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*

