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11/1/20, All Saints, Joshua 3:7-17

“Choosing A Leader”

Today, I want to get right to what I find peculiar about our scripture. The Nation of Israel was about to conclude their long wilderness journey. The Promised Land was in sight. They just had to cross the Jordan River. We read the story, so we know God intervened by holding back the water allowing the people to cross over.

What I find intriguing is that God required a number of the people to enter the river prior to providing the miracle. God would hold back the water so they could pass through on dry land, but first, some of them had to get wet. In other words, they had to move forward before the way was made clear. They had to take the initial steps trusting, at some point, God would intervene and a path would be provided.

I love this, because I think life is often like that. How many times have you had to move forward with something without being certain how it was going to work out, trusting a path would appear? I went to college very unsure what to

declare as a major. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, but I just got myself there and was able to figure it out as I went.

When you get into a romantic relationship, you don't know where it will go or whether it will last. You just enter into it. One date leads to another. You survive your first fight. Eventually you meet the parents. You might start a family and suddenly realize you have no idea how to raise a child.

Everything I know about business I've learned from watching Shark Tank. Some of the people I've seen on that show are people who started a business without knowing what obstacles they'd face or even how to manage success. They just jumped in and took a chance, because they had a passion for something.

I imagine, if I'm one of those people in today's story, I'm standing on the bank of the Jordan wondering how in the world everyone was going to cross that river. I'd want to see the waters part and the way appear before we all started across. It occurs to me that what that moment required was a leader the people could trust.

They needed the right leader, because they would have to move, not because the way was obvious, but in response to the leader's instructions. They needed a leader that knew God intimately. They needed a leader that they trusted was steeped in conversation with the Lord. They needed a leader they believed had God's blessing.

That leader was Joshua. So, when he said, "I need twelve of you to start walking into the water and just stand there," some of them would actually do it. Because they had the right leader, some were willing to walk into that water and trust that a way would open up.

Remember, at this point, Moses was dead. Moses was the one that led them out of slavery. Moses was the one who interceded with God on their behalf as they wandered in the wilderness. He was the one that brought them to within sight of the Promised Land. With Moses dead, they needed another Moses-type leader to bring them the rest of the way.

Apparently, that's why God 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." Both leaders brought the people across boundary waters and then

guided them in new territory. In the book of Joshua, Moses is labeled the servant of the Lord eighteen times. In the very last chapter, Joshua receives that same title.

The biblical witness is that throughout history God has raised up leaders and prophets to instruct, and to guide, and to assist people in overcoming obstacles. Men and women have stepped into those roles: Moses and Miriam, Elijah and Esther, Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Paul. On All-Saints Sunday we remember them and name many of them.

So, who is that Moses-type and Joshua-type leader today? In whom can you and I place our trust? Who is the leader of this church? Pastor Dan has been here a few years, but he is not the leader of this church. I have an important sounding title, Senior Minister, but I am not the leader of this church.

I hope the answer to my question is obvious. I'm reminded of a little quip. A pastor was giving a children's message in the worship service. She asked, "What is grey, collects nuts and has a bushy tail?" One of the kids raises her hand and says, "I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel."

In this case, the answer is the obvious one. Jesus Christ is the leader of this church. That's a defining characteristic of the United Church of Christ. In the UCC, the local church has a significant amount of freedom. We don't have bishops assigning pastors to churches. UCC churches are not required to heed mandates from a governing body. But our freedom is not for the purpose of doing whatever we want. It's for the purpose of deciding how to most faithfully follow Jesus in the context in which the church finds itself.

So, I'm just like you. I'm constantly discerning what discipleship of Jesus Christ requires of me and of this community of faith. I'm spending time in prayer. I'm reading and studying my Bible. I'm trying to align my desires and my actions with those of Jesus.

I believe God has provided us a trustworthy leader and I think that's important, because, in life, the way is not always clear. This pandemic has made that obvious. Sometimes reaching our destination requires moving forward with fear and uncertainty. Sometimes we just have trust. We have to step into the river before the waters part. Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

And it's striking how, in the Gospels, Jesus is cast as either a Moses-type or Joshua-type leader. Moses led the people through the Red Sea and then wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus was baptized in water and then led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. The name Jesus is actually the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It means "God saves."

Lastly, I want to take this opportunity to say something about this time in which we are choosing a national leader. It is no secret. Our nation is polarized at the moment. That polarization has found its way into many local churches, including our own.

I want you to know that it will never be my intention to promote the agenda of the Democratic Party. It will never be my intention to promote the agenda of the Republican Party. In fact, my goal is not even to promote my own agenda. It's my task to promote Jesus Christ and the Jesus agenda.

At times, I may fail. I'm human. There may be times when I say something from the pulpit with which you disagree, but my goal is always to preach and teach Jesus. If you disagree with something I say, I want your argument to be with him, not me. At a service of installation for a pastor, I once heard a wise preacher say,

“It’s a funny thing we do in churches, we pay someone to tell us what we don’t want to hear.”

I don’t know if this is true for you, but in my efforts to follow Jesus, I’ve gone places I never would have gone and done things I never would have done otherwise. It has required me to leave my familiar surroundings and locate myself among the poor and those in need.

I’ve met incredible people in the church and on service trips and made friendships I never would have made. I’ve stretched beyond my comfort level and pushed beyond what I thought I was capable of. That’s what is possible when we allow Jesus to lead us and when we trust him enough to step into the river before the waters part.

In fact, I would say that’s what baptism largely represents. Moses and the people went through water. So, Joshua and his people went through water. So, Jesus presented himself for baptism in water. So, we, along with every Christian before and after us experience the water of baptism. You’ve already entered the river.

I'm excited to see where, together, Jesus will lead us!