

October 30, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible:	Joshua	3:7-17
Epistle:	I Thessalonians	2: 9-13
Gospel	Matthew	23: 1-12

MEDITATION: Unknown Waters

I really love all the stories in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, ... well maybe not quite ALL of them, but most. Maybe that speaks to my love of history and learning from the past. When we look back at the stories and the learning's from history that have influenced our own pasts and those of our ancestors, I think we have the possibility, if we wish to embrace it, of changing the future. I believe that is why the stories of our ancestors are so important for us today. And not just our ancestors but the "important" people that we have admired for their great accomplishments and the things they have taught us through their own lives. And yet again, not just the great and important people that the world has known but the great and important people in our own lives, who have influenced us and taught US as we have tried to emulate them. That's what it means to be a SAINT. You don't have to be a world renowned person to be a SAINT. You just need to be someone who has made a difference to another human beings life and you to will be counted among the SAINTS. And that my friends, is each one of us. We all have had some impact on other people's lives, and we hope and indeed pray that that influence has been a positive rather than a negative for others.

Here in the book of Joshua, we have a wonderful tale. The Israelites had been through so many difficulties and hardships and here they were just on the brink of entering the Promised Land. And instead of an easy walk in, they were faced by what must have seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. It must have seemed like the last straw on the camel's back. How often does that happen in life! So near the goal and yet so far! The river Jordan was at flood stage as it was springtime and there were no boats or bridges. They were in sight of their objective and yet they were compelled to wait. They did not cross for three long, weary days. Joshua held them back! There was to be no impulsive action, because that is always a peril to those who would enter lands of promise. Nothing must be left to chance. Every detail must be meticulously planned. Preparation must be made for every eventuality.

Then God speaks to Joshua and the way forward is clear. They are about to pioneer in new territory. Without the leadership and guidance of God, they do not know where to go. This is a vitally important lesson for all who would grope their way forward into new and hitherto unexplored realms. Each new adventure lifts that warning. Every new experience requires not only courage, but caution. The people gather on the shore of the river and they wait as the advance into the Land of Promise is made not by the military, but by the priests. The favorable presence of God must go before them. Not shock troops, but the Ark of the Covenant must lead. The symbol of God's presence is to be in the vanguard. And the people must stay well behind, signifying the reverence they have for

the utter holiness of the ark. They are not to become casual or even careless in their habit of communion with God.

The people were to remember that God was always active, always dynamically here, in this world, with them. They were urged to live with a sense of wonder. They were to be eager, alert, and expectant.

Perhaps for us in our time, this is the part of the story that is meant to teach us something. Something that can influence how we relate to God in our own time. Can we recapture our own sense of wonder at God's presence with us? Is it because we lose sight of a God who can do the incredible and the impossible that we meet frustration and futility in our lives? Can we like the Israelites put our lives into the hands of a God, who is able to do the impossible and the incredible. Is it not when we lose this faith that life is overwhelmed with cynicism and despair? What would happen if we in wonder believed that God has greater things in store for the tomorrows of our lives? Sooner or later we must realize that the hope of the world ultimately is in the hands of those who believe in a God able to do the impossible and the incredible.

Nations have always been fearful of a leadership motivated by ambition or greed or fame. The children of Israel saw in Joshua something not of earth or time. They recognized him as one who lived with a consciousness of God's presence and power. God promised God's presence to the people. God was then and is now both personal and active in human affairs. The Hebrew people knew God not by what God was, but by what God did! We tend to lay too much emphasis on what God is like. We tend to forget that the story of the Bible is the story of US and our redemption. Through the whole of the Bible runs this story of divine assurance. On every page is the promise, "I will not fail you." God is at work in the world. In our struggling and working and agonizing for a braver and better tomorrow, God also struggles and toils and agonizes. God does not hold aloof from the hopes and aspirations of people.

And the story continues, the Ark going forward and the people following, no longer afraid because they KNOW that God is with them. The waters were held back and the people crossed. The journey ahead was no longer full of fear and dread. As long as the Ark was with them, the people knew that all would be well in the end. The unknown was no longer frightening to them.

How is that any different for us? We too are often in unknown waters. We in this very congregation are uncertain of the future and the path that lies ahead of us. Are we to stay cowering on the shore OR can we like the Israelites reignite the wonder and the awe in the knowledge that our God can and does accomplish the incredible and the impossible? We too can step out into the unknown waters of God's future, trusting that God will be with us.

Joshua, Paul, and Jesus all act out of a radical awareness of God being with them. Why can we not do the same? Jesus was up against formidable foes in the Pharisees and yet he kept on doing what he knew was right and he kept on speaking against that which he

knew to be wrong. Jesus knew the role of servant was far greater than the role of being an exalted one. Our world desperately needs the hope, peace, love and joy that the gospel brings. Jesus' point of course, was not that it is wrong to give honor where honor is due, but that our priorities are often all wrong. We lift up and celebrate the wrong things. We honor the wealthy and powerful rather than those who have distinguished themselves by lives of service.

A few years back Harvard University gave two honorary doctorates in the same year. The first was Walter Annenberg, the founder of TV Guide a billionaire and friend of Presidents Ford and Reagan. That same year an honorary doctorate was also given to Oseola McCarty. She was a sixth grade dropout who spent 75 years as a washerwoman in rural Mississippi. In her life she saved 150,000 dollars which she gave to the University of Southern Mississippi, saying "I wanted to do some good for somebody else's child".

When you hear Jesus say, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted," do you think first of Annenberg or McCarty?

Do WE live our lives accumulating all we can for ourselves or do we live our lives in service of those who need us. Do we measure our lives by how much we get or how much we give? Do we ask to be recognized or do we recognize that others are watching us, especially our children, to see if we do as we say. Not one of us here will ever achieve all that we have admired in the Saints and disciples that went before us but we can encourage each other to keep on trying to be all that God would have us be. We can question our own priorities and opinions and see if we are looking out for others or for ourselves. We can help each other to know the incredible, awe and wonder of God with us no matter how the waters part or heap up all around us. WE CAN DO THAT. WE CAN DO NOTHING LESS. AMEN