

## **FAITH IS A VERB!**

We were so excited we could hardly sleep! The day had come at last. Our possessions, what little we had, were ready to go. We had heard our parents and the elders talk about this day for so long, and now it was here. Tomorrow we would be crossing the Jordan and establishing a home for ourselves – finally – a home that God had promised he would give to us. After our evening meal last night, our leader, Joshua, gathered us all together and told us what to expect tomorrow and how we should proceed.

When morning broke, everyone seemed awake already. We wiped the sleep out of our eyes, ate a little for our meal, and stood around, waiting for Joshua to give the word.

As we moved forward we chatted excitedly among ourselves until we reached the shore of the Jordan. Wait a minute! Is God sure about this? The river is at flood stage, the water is murky; you can't see the bottom and who knows what's at the bottom. Yuck! There is no way to cross. Is Joshua sure this is what we're supposed to do today? We have little children with us. It's one thing to put your foot in a gentle stream but another to step into a river in flood.

The priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders were at the beginning of the formation. The Ark has always symbolized God's presence with us. Finally, after some prayers, the priests took a step forward and everyone proceeded to follow them. Many of us, however, were frightened, even though we were excited. We had never been here before. We just didn't know what to expect after we crossed the Jordan. But God had promised Joshua safety and a promised land, just as he had promised Moses, so Joshua trusted God to make good on his promise.

As soon as the priests' feet touched the waters, the river backed away in both directions. Oh, what a sight! The priests proceeded to the middle of the river and stayed there until all of us had crossed safely to the other side. [Pause]

You may remember that this is the second crossing for the people of Israel. This group, though, is not the same group who crossed with

Moses. With Moses, those who had escaped the Pharaoh entered the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea. The group we read about today is leaving that wilderness and crossing at the Jordan. But there's an interesting difference between these two crossings. At the first crossing the people waited with Moses until God parted the sea and they could cross (a la Charleton Heston). The people didn't have to do anything but wait for the dry land to appear before they crossed. However, at today's Jordan crossing, the people had to put their feet in the water before the water parted to create dry land for them to walk on.

At the Red Sea God made the first move and parted the waters. At the Jordan God waited until the people made the first move before he created the dry crossing for them. They had to get their feet wet before God would hold back the waters.

God spoke and things happened. Yet Israel could not sit on the sidelines. Every word and act of God required a response from them because that is the nature of faith. Faith means trusting that God will deliver, that God will guide, that God will forgive, that God will act according to His promises.

Faith (trusting God) is not saying, "I believe God will stop the waters" and then waiting on the riverbank for the waters to stop. Faith is actually stepping into the water.

In November 1962 I was 22 years old, married, with a three-month old baby. I lived in my home town of 25,000 people. My husband had finished college and accepted a teaching position in Milwaukee. So in February we moved. There I was – a small-town girl with a six-month-old baby, traveling to this large state and city that I had never been to before and where I knew no one. I think of that experience as one akin to coming up to the Jordan: crossing from the state of Minnesota, crossing the mighty Mississippi River, to a land that I had never seen before, during one of the coldest winters on record in Milwaukee, and stepping into my future. [Pause]

Faith is actually stepping into the waters, stepping into the future that God is creating. That is exactly what Israel did. God promised to stop the flow of the Jordan when the priests stepped into the water. Then, after the river was halted, the people needed to trust God and put their feet into the water. Their faith, their trust in God, involved action.

Faith always involves action. Luke described faith in terms of “following Jesus.” Paul spoke of “the obedience of faith.” James declared, “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Again, their faith, their trust in God, involved action. Do we trust God enough? Do we trust ourselves enough?

Ken and I weren't here when this congregation began the discussion to become open and affirming. There were those, I'm assuming, who felt the time was right for this discussion, and began the process.

There are probably other programs and ways that Emanuel stepped out in faith. Those who believed in these methods, programs and projects were not afraid to get their feet wet. They did not wait for God to give them the word to go ahead. They just did the work necessary to get them started, with lots of prayer, trusting God to make good on his promises, and then thanked God for the things that were happening.

Sometimes when we are waiting on God, I wonder if God is waiting on us. There is a Christian dating service ad on TV which goes like this: “Sometimes we wait for God to make the next move when he is saying, ‘It's your time to act.’”

I wonder if God is waiting for us to get our feet wet. Maybe we have to get our feet wet in order for something to happen.

As followers of Christ, as a people who have been promised a new land, a new life, we are called to step out in faith – before the circumstances seem to be ready - that we may experience the promised life. We are called in the here and now.

First, the people had to take the first step, they had to get their feet wet. Sometimes God waits for us to take the first move or step before he acts. But the second part of this story is that once we have gathered enough courage to take that first step, we then need to garner additional courage to take the next step, which is trusting that God will lead us.

As the people of Israel had the Ark of the Covenant with them, symbolizing God's presence, we also have God with us as we step into the waters or whatever circumstances may be facing us. We trust that God's presence is with us even though it doesn't look promising. We know that we can't expect our journey through this life to be an easy one, a totally

peaceful one. On our journey through life and to the new life in Christ, we have to cross deep waters, rivers whose bottoms we can't see, but we are encouraged to step out boldly, trusting in the One who not only parted the Red Sea and made the Jordan River cease its flowing, but who also conquered death and brought to light life and eternal rest in Jesus.

If we take the plunge – step out in faith and get our feet wet – if we start walking with the ark of God's presence in here [head] and here [heart] into our unknown circumstances, then God will create dry land for us to cross and bring us safely to the other side.

Faith means commitment, not just agreement. Faith involves the will, not just the mind. Faith is action, not just words.

Faith is a verb!

Amen.