

**“Repeat Miracle”**  
**Joshua 3:7-17**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**November 5, 2017**

When you want to cross a river, you look for the place where a tributary drops down from the ridges. Silt is deposited there, making the river shallower. That’s where river crossings happen all through the Old Testament – at the fords, those shallower parts in the river.<sup>1</sup> It’s where Joshua and company prepare to cross the river today. But on that day the river was up at flood stage and bridges would not be built until Roman times. When the river was at its normal height, a river crossing might be 3-4 feet deep: challenging, but doable. But at harvest time, with snow melting from the elevations of Mount Hermon, the river was up at the flood stage, the Jordan’s waters flowing over its banks just as the text says. At this point of crossing at this time of year the river would have been ten to 12 feet deep and 140 feet wide. It was not a good time to cross over.<sup>2</sup>

But it gets worse. Israel’s enemies were all around. The Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. It’s not a good idea to cross a river with your enemies all around, at least that what the war theorists will tell you. Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian General who wrote a treatise on war still read in war colleges today, put it this way. “A large river which crosses the direction of the attack is always very inconvenient for the assailant. . .without a decided superiority, both in moral and physical force, a general will not place himself in such a position.”<sup>3</sup> The mud on the banks of the Jordan could get so bad this time of year it could suck a horse down to its knees. It was not a good time to cross over.<sup>4</sup>

And then there was the current. More than one explorer complained about the violent currents that made crossing the Jordan dangerous. That dreaded current could draw even the best of swimmers out to the center of the river, away from the banks and downstream to who knows where. The book of 1 Chronicles even records the names of some warriors who made it across.<sup>5</sup> Crossing during flood stage was heroic, worthy of remembrance. It was not an easy time to cross over.<sup>6</sup>

But then again, Israel’s done this kind of thing before. God’s already parted the Red Sea coming out of Egypt. It’s basically a rehash of an earlier miracle. From Joshua’s point of view I bet it’s kind of a bummer. All God can come up with is

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Beck, “Why Do Joshua’s Readers Keep Crossing the River? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Joshua 3-4,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, December 1, 2005, pp. 694-695.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 695.

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, #1,

<https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/OnWar1873/BK7ch08.html#a>. The idea for this citation came from Beck.

<sup>4</sup> Beck, p. 695.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 12:15.

<sup>6</sup> Beck, p. 697.

miracle hand-me-downs? Can't God come up with something more than a repeat miracle?

It's a let down to celebrate the thing you've already done before, a subtle suggestion that God's biggest miracles have already happened, that your best years are actually behind you, that there's nothing new under the sun. It's a letdown to arrive at the conclusion that the best miracles we can conjure up are just rehashes of the ones that have already happened. Repeat miracles are a drag on morale.

Just look at the church – with our congregations are declining, buildings crumbling, and many closing. When what some of us can most celebrate are buildings that *used to tower* above the skyline, and pews that *used to swell* with people, and power that *used to have a voice*.

Just look at our city whose elders - of all races – talk about the good old days of steel mills, when living wage work wasn't confined to the formally educated. When Pennsylvania Avenue was the thriving cultural center of the African-American community instead of a good place to sling drugs. When Baltimore was known as a capital of the nation instead of Bodymore, Murdaland.

And I suspect there are some among us who face a similar depressing outlook in our own lives. Remembering a relationship that used to be strong. Remembering a financial situation that used to be manageable. Remembering a life that used to be good.

It's a letdown only to be able to celebrate the miracles of the past. It hurts morale to realize that your best years are behind you. It makes it hard to drag yourself to the present when what seems the most fulfilling was back in the past.

And yet this repeat miracle at the banks of the Jordan is also very different from what's gone before. The Israelites crossing the Red Sea were moving from slavery to liberation. From captivity to freedom. The Israelites crossing over the Jordan are moving from landlessness to landedness, from promise to fulfillment, from being a wandering people to a settled one.

The *movement* is the same – across a river that is difficult if not impossible to cross safely – but the departure points, the destinations and the landmarks are all different. *They are not the same*.

It's important to understand those distinctions and not to get them confused. Because if you are an Israelite standing on the banks of the Jordan looking for Red Sea landmarks, you are in trouble. The landmarks that saved the previous generations, the shores that welcomed the previous generations, the signs that guided the previous generations – those landmarks aren't there for you. The terrain is different. The landmarks are different. The departure points and destinations – they're all different. You can pray for the same movement of the past – from danger to safety, from risk to promise, from despair to hope. But you've got to look for different landmarks that the ones that led your ancestors to safety.

And yet that's the mindset that too many of our churches are bringing to the shores of the dangerous currents that are afoot. We keep looking for the landmarks of the past. We wade into the waters and think, if we just resurrect the Sunday School programs of the past that saved our grandparents' generations surely that will lead us to safer shores. If we just resurrect the music programs of our parents'

generations surely that will lead us to safer shores. If we just resurrect the chaplaincy pastorates of the past, surely that will lead us to safer shores.

It's a similar mindset that we face in our public life together. If we just bring back stop-and-frisk policies rooted in racial inequality that will solve our crimes problems. If we just bring back big coal that will someone solve our jobs problem. If we just bring back 1950s religious values that will magically solve the entrenched unemployment and poverty that is feeding the drug economy.

But you can't get across the Jordan by looking for Red Sea landmarks. You can't get to the promised land if you are looking for way into the wilderness. We can't follow those landmarks. The terrain is different. We don't get to cross the Red Sea at the point where our ancestors crossed it. We don't even get to cross the Jordan at the point where our ancestors crossed it. We have the face the rivers of our own time. We have to face the dangers of our own time. We have to cross over uncharted waters at flood stage when it's not a good time to cross.

If you want to know how to cross those waters the best thing to bring forward from the past is not the maps of the people who went before you, but their faith. The faith of a people who trusted that God was capable of making insurmountable rivers, passable. The faith of a people who trusted that God was capable of giving them superiority in overcoming the enemies of God in their time. The faith of a people who trusted in the God of crossing over.

And living that faith in our time is a hard thing to do because you have to commit to crossing the waters. Uncertainty will kill you in those raging waters. You have to commit to those 10-12 foot waters trusting that God is going to make a way. You have to commit yourself to the crossing before you know how you're going to get to the other side. You have to put your whole self in the dangerous river, crossing at a time when even the wisest of generals recommend staying at home because it's not a good time to cross a river.

Living that faith is hard which is probably why so many churches decide to stay on what looks like the safety of the shore. It's too dangerous to call on the power of God in the presence of our public life, not at this time in America when everything is partisan and politicized. It's too dangerous to call on the power of God to change the world and risk upsetting our shrinking list of donors. It's too dangerous to call on the power of God because the power of God might not and without the power of God we'll be overcome by the waters.

But don't you know that the only real purpose of the church is to shape a people who are willing to make that crossing. God didn't call a people only to have them stand still. Standing still might appear safe to some, but it's always a death wish for the people of God. The movement of the people – This is the *repeat miracle* of God. . The power of God to give a people what they need to cross on over. That's the repeat miracle.

And we've seen that movement before. We made in 1963 when the church crossed the river for racial integration and the church was pruned, and God gave us new life. We've seen that movement in 1980 when we crossed the river to declare our commitment to this corner and God gave us new life in the midst of the troubled waters. We made that movement in the 1990s when we declared ourselves a More Light Church, welcoming all people into our fellowship. I've seen it happen in the

lives of people of this church who left behind the promise of a fat paycheck or a safe life to throw yourself into the raging waters that stand between us and racial equity, justice for every child, equitable development, healthcare for everyone, a fair city.

We look to the past for the faith that girded those who have gone before us. We celebrate their generosity, their courage, and their faith – faith that built a church that sees itself as God's movement people. A place that gives people what they need to cross on over. But we don't look for their landmarks. We look for our own and the faith that calls a people to commit ourselves to the raging waters of our time. Commit our whole selves – our money, our time, our lives to crossing over. And maybe one day, the people who come after us will remember the terrible waters that we had to cross in our time. The waters that looked ridiculously dangerous, that threatened to consume every ounce of what is good. And they will marvel at our crossing and the faith that led us into those waters. Faith of the God of crossings. Faith of a movement people.