

Stepping Into the Water

Joshua 3:7-17

It is very hard to move on... go forward again after the death of someone we love. Grief can be completely debilitating, robbing us of energy and the ability to see ahead. It is this way with family and it is this way with the people of Israel as they face the death of Moses. Moses has led them out of Egypt and slavery. Moses has led them through the desert, providing water and food along the way with God's interventions. But now, on the brink of the Promised Land, about to stop their wandering and set down roots, Moses dies. How scary for them. Imagine how they must have feel. How will they know what to do? Will God still be with them? But God sees their pain, and gives them time to grieve, and then provides a sign that God's presence remains with the people, and the mantle of leadership is going to pass on to another. God instructs Joshua that as they get to the Jordan River they are to wait and take the Ark of the Covenant in the water first and the water will stop flowing and the people will pass through on dry land. This repetition of the miracle of making a way in the water is the way the people are assured that God is with them, and that like Moses, Joshua is able to hear God's voice and direct them in the way they should go.

God never abandons us. But every day, the people of God on earth changes. Some die and some are born. Some stop leading and some rise up to leadership. Faith UCC as small as we are, is also constantly in flux. This past year, even this past week, we have said goodbye to stalwarts of this Church, people who gave so much of their time and talent to create and sustain Faith United Church of Christ as a witness. But like the people of Israel, we must press on without them. As brilliant and charismatic as our preacher is, someday he will not be here – though hopefully that is many years from now. Even our elected leadership is going to change soon. We can let the truth of change lead us to fear, or we can step into the water knowing God is the one in charge of Faith UCC. We are the temporary Stewards, the one God has given charge of the Church, but as our name says, we are the United Church of Christ and it is Christ who is the true and constant leader.

Even in families this is true. This year we have also committed friends and family and neighbors to God's care. But through it all, God has brought comfort and healing and restored hope. And people are amazing resilient. Even in the midst of grief we have seen people

reconfigure their lives after losing loved ones and make it work with the help of family and community and God.

Faith UCC and our families are living organisms, and when we lose a part of our family, others come forward to fill the gaps, to do the tasks necessary for the health and well being of all. That is how we know if a community is real and true. Often when an organization, whether a business or a church is lead only by a charismatic leader, when they die the organization dies. But God's people of faith keep moving forward, because God is at the head, even though now and then great human faces are at the forefront.

Great leaders like Moses, or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi do inspire us. But they all have feet of clay. And there are things we know and experience today, that they did not. No one is able to see their blind sides when they are alive. No one follows God perfectly. I think this is very clear in today's scripture. Though it is among the oldest hallowed tradition of our faith, I do not think that God actually commanded the people of Israel to go in and kill and enslave all the peoples of that land. This kind of tribal thinking still causes the human family great suffering and violence. But we are getting better. We are no longer stoning or shutting out our Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual or Queer companions of the journey of faith. We continue to make slow progress on racial injustice. We sometimes work together as nations and people of faith to help others – like with the Ebola crisis in Africa.

As I think about the progress in my lifetime toward becoming a Global Community of peace and justice for all, I am both heartened and discouraged. We have had great leaders taken from us, but their words still push us on. The Human Community takes a step forward in one place and then in another goes back 3 steps. This is how it is. But as that great hymn *Forward Through the Ages* reminds us, God keeps moving us forward over time, even though we will sometimes fail, even though our leaders will sometimes fail.

Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall; in each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all. Bound by God's far purpose in one living whole, move we on together to the shining goal, forward through the ages in unbroken line move the faithful spirits at the call divine.

As we gather around this table now, we are joined by those we remember today, those who have become part of the Great Cloud of Witnesses, the ones whose service on earth is done. They were not perfect, but were human like we are and we remember and celebrate today that they loved and laughed and when at their best they made a difference in this world; and when they stumbled on the road of life, God picked them up and helped them get back on the path of wholeness. Everyone in life does the best they can. And so we remember their triumphs, acknowledge their faults and thank God for their courage and faith. They have given to us a legacy of faith and given us the light of Christ to hold up in a world of need and fear.

Jesus himself asked that of his disciples on his last night with them. But he did not pass on the legacy without a gift to help strengthen them for the days ahead. He wanted to literally give them a part of himself, and so gathered at that Passover Feast, remembering the people of Faith for many ages, Jesus gave them a new memory to sustain them.

In the upper room with the disciples, during the retelling of the story of God's leading the people out of Egypt was recalled, Jesus took one of the unleavened breads, blessed it and broke it saying... "this is my body broken for you." Then after supper he took the last cup of wine and after giving thanks for it he said, "take drink this is my blood shed for many... as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you remember me until I come again...."

Joshua 3:7-17

⁷The LORD 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. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'" ⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God." ¹⁰Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."

¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.