

“My friends, come with me into the river.”

Imagine for a moment how the people of Israel must have received these words Joshua might have spoken that day. He'd just shared God's instructions for the people to follow their priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, into the waters of the River Jordan.

“He's really lost it now! No way I'm going into that river. He SAYS God will perform a miracle and pull back the waters. But what if he's wrong? Surely we'll drown. Egypt isn't great, sure – we don't have our freedoms – but at least we have food, clothes, shelter...and our lives.”

I wonder, how many of us can relate to some part of this? Has Life ever asked you to put your faith in somebody or some institution that appeared to be leading you astray – or just didn't seem to know where it was going?? Did you ever resist moving forward through something that didn't look so appealing – in fact, looked fraught with danger? Danger to everything you hold dear, to all the beliefs you've built your life on; danger even to your very person?

I know I can relate. I've faced so many of these experiences personally I can't even keep count. I think most of you know of the most recent transition in my life – moving out of Slidell Road and on to a new chapter. One day in the recent past, I found myself on the banks of a ferocious, raging river of change, threatening to sweep away all I'd invested – emotionally, financially, spiritually, physically – in a home that I've always dreamed of, with people I've loved for decades. I'm here to tell you, that's not a change I ever wanted, or ever anticipated.

In this church community, we stand on a similar bank, facing a similar river of change that has already begun to sweep over us. Not only are there individuals in

this community – maybe even each one of us – facing our own frightening, painful, and potentially devastating changes – but also this community as a whole has been thrust into its own river of change. We have recently lost our leader, our teacher, our comforter, our friend.

This is where the metaphor of the banks of the Jordan breaks down just a little. Unlike the people of Israel, we were in an excellent situation. We were blessed with the presence of a gifted leader, who could preach like nobody's business. He was an amazing teacher, astute at recognizing leaders and giving them just the right challenges to grow them up. He was a ubiquitous comforter, steady with counseling during a crisis, quick with a note of support in remembrance of a death or other painful anniversary, and consistently showing up at our hospital bedsides.

AND.

When Life came calling for him, when he stood on the banks of his own personal raging river of change, he led us by example. Constricted by fear, bowed by grief, HE SAID YES. He walked forward into the river, not knowing from where his support would come, but trusting that it would.

AND.

We now stand on this bank, facing the raging waters. We have taken our first tentative steps forward in faith.

The good news of this story is this: God is with us. No matter what we face, no matter how well or how poorly we react, God always goes with us wherever we go. All our needs are provided for. Comfort and Presence is always immediately

available to us. Our community members are the place where God shows up for us. And, we are the place where God shows up for our community.

God told Joshua to have the priests go into the Jordan first, carrying the Ark of the Covenant. In his article titled "The Typical Meaning of the Jordan", Roel Velema references multiple Old Testament books in describing the Ark as follows:

"The upper surface or lid of the ark...was surrounded with a rim of gold, and on each of the two sides were two gold rings, in which were placed two gold-covered poles by which the ark could be carried... At each end, there were two cherubim over the ark, with their faces turned toward each other.... The ark was deposited in the 'holy of holies', and was placed so that one end of the carrying poles touched the veil which separated the two sections of the tabernacle...

"Stored in the ark were the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone, which were the testimony or evidence of God's covenant with the people, the pot of 'manna' (from Exodus 16:33), and Aaron's rod that budded (in Numbers 17:10 and Hebrew 9:4). (...)

"The ark represented...the presence, nature and purpose of [God]."

In other words, the priests were literally carrying God's promise to be with us ahead of the people into the Jordan. And God told Joshua, in the passage we read this morning, that the miracle of the parting of the waters would be a sign to the people that God was with them.

What strikes me about this is the importance of the message that God is with us. I mean, think about how difficult it must have been to lug around this enormous box, when you have to walk everywhere. It's very possible these people have

been walking all day, maybe all night. It must be pretty important for the people to have a huge visual reminder. And God is sending a miracle – making water “pile up” on one side – while the people walk thru. I find it comforting that God cares so much about these people’s state of mind while crossing the river that he makes sure they see reminders of his presence everywhere. I mean, if you think about it, does their knowing God’s presence really make a difference as to whether or not they get across the river into the Promised Land? Wouldn’t they get there either way?

The thing is, I think we can go through the river however we need to get through it, and that’s totally OK with God. I think God gets it that right now is an extremely difficult time to be alive. But....I think God offers us signposts that point to an option for us that might make the trip - easier? Perhaps God is so invested in us seeing signs of his presence because he knows that we will suffer less if we can count on his comfort and his desire to lay out a feast for us. Perhaps we will suffer less if we can relax, just a bit, and trust that where Life is leading, this river we’re tumbling along in, is exactly where we need to be going. Perhaps that which feels like destruction to us is ultimately our salvation.

In each of my personal river experiences there have been many, many miracles. And every single one has come at the hands of another human. In my most recent transformation, someone in this room showed up when I literally couldn’t go any further, and she carried me. She just dropped everything in her life and spent two full days packing the rest of our stuff. That, my friends, was nothing less than God in form.

This spiritual community has also witnessed miracles, whether or not we've recognized them as such. Since our pastor left, we've been ministered to by a series of individuals – some strangers to us, some we've known before, and some who are a beloved part of this very community. We may have wanted to hang on to the manna God was providing in the form of our beloved pastor, but that wasn't an option. For some reason that is unknown to us at this current moment, it is ours to cross that river. And while we cross, God is providing a rich feast for us.

We are each God in form for each other, and this doesn't have to be a heavy burden. I believe what we want most is to know we are connected. Don't underestimate the power of sending periodic cards or texts or emails. Going through an intense experience of change is incredibly isolating. People don't know what to say to you; they are afraid to say something that makes you feel worse, so they don't reach out. The person going through the crisis often feels like it's too overwhelming to have to repeatedly have to answer the question, "How are you?" when they know the truth will bum you out. Visits are even harder; the person usually feels pressure to cleaning the house, make themselves presentable, and generally just work to make sure the other person feels OK about the horrible things the person is experiencing. That's exhausting. When I was going through my cancer treatment, one of the best things in the world was getting cards. To know that somebody was thinking of me, and wanted me to know, enough to put effort into buying a card, writing in it, finding my correct address, getting a stamp and mailing it!! One lovely woman from my church sent me a card every week or two filled with little strips of construction paper on which she had written powerful affirmative statements. This was one of the best

things I got!! In this community, simply showing up on Sunday morning is one of the most powerful things we can do for each other. So, are you ready?

My friends, come with me into the river.