

Going where no one has gone before

Joshua 3
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Please open your Bibles with me to Joshua chapter 3.

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Pastor Sunday Adelaja is a Nigerian man who went to the Ukraine in the 90's and planted a church with a handful of poor African students.

His church grew steadily, and then in 2006, while on a flight back to the Ukraine God gave him a vision of the global church. Adelaja says " I could sense the burden God has for His Church to be reformed in [preparation for] gathering in the last harvest. From that vision, I came to understand that God is not satisfied with the state of the modern Church.... With five billion people still unsaved, we must gain ground... [Adelaja continues] What humbled me, though, was the impression that God was challenging me to do something about it."¹

From here Pastor Adelaja gave himself completely to God's vision and his church redoubled their efforts of reaching the poor in their neighbourhood and planting churches.

Today his church has around 25,000 people, they operate 300 rehab centers for drug addicts, feed thousands in soup kitchens, operate several Bible schools, and have planted over 700 churches world wide including dozens in Canada.²

God is on the move.

Joshua chapter 3.

[Read Joshua 3:1-17]

[Pray]

The thesis of our sermon today is as follows:

From discouraged to astonished the Living God's consecrated people follow Him down a road they've never walked before.

1.) Let's start with the first part of that sentence, "From discouraged to astonished."

Look at verse 1 and 15

¹ <http://www.pastorsunday.org/about-us/church-shift>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunday_Adelaja

[Read Joshua 3:1;15a]

Its flood season and Israel finds itself standing before impossibility on the shores of the Jordan River... Do you ever get the sense as you read these stories that impossibility seems to follow these people around.

They have stood before the Red Sea, survived in the desert without water, and looked the giants of Canaan in the eye. And God has been faithful throughout it all, and yet every time they have bumped into impossibility they have grumbled. Israel specializes in discouragement.

And so I ask you, is it any coincidence that they find themselves here again? I don't think so. Actually God is going out of His way to make these impossible moments happen.

Take the Red Sea for example. During the exodus the people of Israel fled north east toward Canaan towards the Red Sea. But if God had just led them a little farther north than east they would have never seen the Sea at all. Were God's directions bad? I don't think so.

And now here they find themselves at the Jordan River and the same thing happens. Did you know that the Jordan River is actually a small river? In fact with the exception of a couple months a year it is not difficult to cross it on foot, but as verse 15 tells us, God chooses flood season to have Israel cross the river!

Didn't God know that if the people just waited a month the river would calm down and they could cross it easily – after 40 years what was one more month? Or if He was really in such a hurry He could have sent them on a 53 kilometer around the Dead Sea which would have taken them no more than a week.

God could have found other ways for Israel to get where they were going, but instead He presented them once again with the impossible.

Now here we come across something interesting – This time Israel doesn't complain. And this is quite remarkable for a nation with a track record of grumbling. How do the people manage to pull this off?

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Well the text doesn't tell us, but I think Joshua is the "culprit" here.

One of Joshua's strongest areas of leadership is that he is unwilling to make the same mistake his forefathers made – not taking God at his word.

In fact the reason Joshua is the new leader is because he is a man who right from the beginning has had the faith to see a reality deeper than the physical one that stands before him.

When the spies entered the land of Canaan forty years earlier Joshua saw from God's perspective. And so now as they stand before the Jordan River Joshua, the man of faith prepares Israel to see God in action.

Ok, jump forward in the story with me to verse 15.

[Read Joshua 3:15-16]

Here we get the fulfillment of God's plan. God causes the flooding Jordan River to dry up. Once again God has brought the people to the edge of impossibility and then brought them through.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been looking at how despite the fact that this book is titled "Joshua" really this is a story about God bringing His plans of redemption into reality. God is the main character, He is the one doing all the action, and the evidence of this is that they action is all impossible.

So a new generation of people moved from discouragement to being astonished at the power of God. But because God is the primary actor this power encounter happens on His terms.

2.) And here is where we get to the second part of our thesis. "From discouraged to astonished the Living God's consecrated people..."

Joshua is very clear that because this is God's story, God is the one doing the action; His standard must be upheld. And the standard is holiness; God does not live with sin.

And so as God's people, they must consecrate themselves out of and understand of who God is.

Now consecration means separating yourself, or making yourself holy and in this text it talks of two motivators for consecration.

Look at verse 5.

[Read Joshua 3:5]

First, consecration is motivated by an expectation of what God is **about to do** among them. Israel lived in eager expectation of God showing up and this hunger to see their God in action drove them to consecration.

But on the other side the thought of God showing up was terrifying and this too drove them to consecration. God was not their buddy, He was their God. And we see this in the second part of verse 4

“But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark, do not go near it.”

Now the Ark of the Covenant not only represented but actually was the presence of God among the people of Israel.

In Exodus 25 God described for Moses what the ark must look like, it was a box made of acacia wood about four feet long and two feet deep and two feet wide. And the whole thing was covered in gold. On each side were long poles so that the priests could carry it without ever touching it.

It's lid, the mercy seat, was made of solid gold and supported two cherubim with their wings just touching.

In the ark Moses put the stone tablets God had written the 10 commandments on, a jar of manna from the desert and Aaron's staff that had budded – all signs of God's terrifying presence. And then God told Moses:

“There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.” (Exodus 25:22)

The Ark of the Covenant was where God met with the Israelites, it was where God's presence rested and the fact that the Ark was going before Israel meant that God Himself was leading the people into the Land.

And the Almighty terror of the Universe must be respected, and so in expectation and in order to be able to endure the holy presence of God Israel consecrated themselves.

3.) And this brings us to the third part of our thesis. “From Discouraged to amazed the Living God's consecrated people follow Him...”

Notice again that the advance into the Promised Land is God's plan not the people's.

Joshua is a military commander. He knows about military strategy, but here he will not rely on his own strength to do the impossible and so it is the priests carrying the Ark of God not the military who are going to lead the people into the Land.

And here we can see two challenges to following the Living God.

The first challenge is for the leaders who are called to go on ahead, and the second is for the people who are called to follow.

First, the leaders. In verse 6 and then verse 8 we read

[Read Joshua 3:6;8]

The job of the priests is to walk out into the impossible. Notice that the waters don't stop until the priest's feet are actually wet.

How foolish they must have looked. Remember as priests these were the most respected people in the culture. And to see them all dressed up and walking straight toward a raging river must have seemed like insanity – to them and to the people.

If doubt is in this story it is right here. These priests had to put their faith into action in spite of what the people around them thought.

But it was God's neck that was on the line here. God is the one who covenanted to bring His people into the land, if He drops the ball the priests will have wet feet, but He will be mocked.

And of course, if He comes through the priests will still have wet feet, but He will get the glory. Either way the priests have to put their feet in the water.

Now this is something we see in the New Testament as well. God is the one who is bringing about the advance of the Kingdom of Heaven. It only happens by His power, and yet we are still commanded to be involved. Last week we heard that God gave a word to Peter, He said

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

This is God's promise to us as a church, but actually this is God's promise to Himself.

Here is the thing. If we stand back in complacency and doubt God and His church will not suffer... let me say that again, If we complacently do nothing God and His church will not suffer. God has ordained that His church will prevail and no action or inaction on our part or the devil's makes any difference to that at all.

But hear this, this is the lesson we can learn from Joshua; when we choose to take God at His word we get to see what He is doing first hand. If we hold back it still happens, we just don't get to see it.”

Can you imagine what life would be like in Pastor Sunday's church? Seeing the kingdom expand like He has? Can you imagine how encouraging that must be?

Living in the reality of seeing God move is what He wants for us.

This was the call to the leaders of Israel and this is the call to our leaders today. If you are a deacon or committee member or a worship leader or a small group facilitator, this message is for you.

“God is calling you to put your feet in the water... Risk it!” The life of a spiritual leader is a life of risk, but it is also a life of extreme reward because God is on the move, and if you are a leader you are the first one who gets to see it happen.

Now this isn't a moment of pride for leaders, this is a moment of humble responsibility. You are the ones who carry God's presence to the people sitting around you. Ask yourself “how wet are my shoes?”

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So that is the first part of following the leader – we ultimately follow God, but God has chosen people to accompany Him in the front.

But there is a second part to this that talks specifically to those who are not leaders.

Look with me at verse 2-4

[Read Joshua 3:2-4]

Notice the emphasis on respect here. It is first and foremost respect for God long before it is respect for human leaders – in this case the Levites.

Notice it doesn't say “stay 1 thousand yards behind the Levites.” No it says, stay behind the Ark – the presence of God in your midst.

But the Levites are the ones that God has ordained will carry His ark. And so staying behind the ark means staying behind them as well. This too is a truth we see throughout the Bible. We respect God by respecting our leaders. In Romans 13 Paul says

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.” (Romans 13:1-2)

Now these words are about the secular authorities who have no fear of God in them. But if that is the case how much truer are they about the leadership within the church?

And so the people are told to stand back from the Ark and the Levites. The people can not get ahead of what God is doing in their midst. And since God has given His leaders the job of carrying His presence the people must follow their leaders.

Stand behind your leaders. People you've chosen out of your midst deacons and deaconess who you have acknowledged as being the spiritual leaders of this community. And we are a people of faith and expectation. God has new things for us. God is going to do amazing things in our midst. We have never been this way before, and these men and women are ones that God has brought to the forefront to lead our community into this. Stand behind them, support them, encourage them, pray for them.

God is on the move, with or without us, but to be part of what He is doing we must follow our leaders.

4.) And this brings us to the last part of our thesis: From discouraged to amazed the Living God's consecrated people must follow Him *down a road we've never walked before*.

Verse four reads follow the Ark and the Levites

[Read Joshua 3:4a]

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These are surprising words for a people who have walked with God their entire lives. Who have witnessed the mighty hand of God at work in their midst. Who have crossed the Red Sea and eaten manna in the desert, and yet they haven't arrived.

The story of God's redemption is an already and a not yet story. There is a sense we have already encountered God – certainly Israel had. And yet there is a “not yet” component to the story as well. God has something for them they haven't experienced before. And what lies ahead is always more than what came behind. We serve an infinite God.

And this theme continues to this day. Yesterday's mercies, yesterday's roads and yesterday's provisions are not for today. “Don't live in the past” God says. God always leads His people down a road they have never been before before.

If God is with us, then we as a church will go where we have never been before. Have you consecrated yourself in anticipation and fearful respect for the Living God to show up here?

In conclusion I want to bring out a couple of ways that this story speaks to us.

Friends, God is alive. We are a church that has seen Him move. But don't we often fail to live in this reality? In the busyness of our daily lives don't we often live as though God didn't exist?

And it's understandable really. We live in an incredibly affluent society. All 100 of us here are among the richest 10% of people in the world. We know how to take care of ourselves and that puts us in incredible danger of losing sight of the reality of God. God wants to take us through impossible, but for people like us with options it is so easy for us to considering alternatives to God's plan.

Some of you may not know but finances have been tight at church over the last few months. In fact our bank account has been lower than it has been in years, maybe decades.

But today I want to say something a bit funny. If this causes us to rely on God this may be the best thing that has happened to us in years.

But reliance on God is not the default. There is a danger for us leaders in this: we could just as easily see the difficulty of the situation and say "well I guess we will just trek around the Dead Sea in our own strength."

Friends, God's path for this church is through the Jordan River, don't allow yourself to be someone who sees alternatives to God's plan, have faith to put your feet in the water.

And finally if you are not a leader here at Fort George that's fine; but throw yourself behind what God is doing here. Don't stand back in skepticism and doubt. Instead hungrily wait in anticipation for what God has not yet done in our midst, and where appropriate encourage your leaders to have eyes of faith.

Joshua sent his priests into the raging river and Pastor Sunday and his congregation of African students set out to plant churches, and God was faithful to do what He had promised. Friends, the same God they worship lives here in Prince George, consecrate yourselves and get ready to put your feet in the water.

[Pray]