

Joshua 3:7-17
 Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37
 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
 Matthew 23:1-12

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 Year A

Dancing Across the River

They had arrived, they had finally arrived, Israel, had come at long last to the river. That river, of course, would be the river Jordan, that incredible river, that sometimes metaphorical river that signifies a *crossing over* to a new way of life and relationship with God. And, let us not forget that that *humble* little river (it's not very big you know) was to be the place of so many significant and momentous occasions in the history and life of Israel, and was to be the place Jesus was to begin his own ministry, *humbling* himself, as he was baptized by John.

It had been a long, long journey for Israel, forty years, to this *humble* moment at the river, to the so longed for Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, to the home that God had promised them as they had fled Pharaoh's slave-driven Egypt.

It had been a journey fraught with so many distractions and upheavals, so many moments of hopelessness and disbelief, so many occasions of second guessing and vying for power, so many moments of turning away from God, so many wrong turns and complete detours of faith that it was clear they had only arrived at this day because God loved them so very much, and would not give up on them.

God had given them for this journey, everything and everyone they needed to get here, but it had still taken 40 years because over and over again they had rebuffed God, and tried to go it alone losing their way, their focus, and becoming distracted by things other than God, in turn squandering and ignoring the gifts that were given to them, to bring them to the Promised Land where they could be transformed.

Of course God had given them Moses, the leader of all leaders, to take them, guide them, to be their spiritual director if you will, on this journey to the Promised Land. Moses *the humble*, self-emptying servant of God, had listened to God with such intention, from the first time he heard God's voice telling him that he was being called to lead these people of out of Egypt.

Moses' call was not an easy one, herding kittens or maybe hummingbirds, does come to mind, but he stuck with them, and he stuck with God's call to him, praying and advocating frequently to God on their behalf, even when they were less than appreciative of him.

Moses would not see them to this day on the river's edge, dying just before their arrival. Now it would be *Joshua's* time as he had been anointed to lead them across the river now, he too listening to God's call to him. A bitter-sweet moment, perhaps, but also a moment that

illustrates that when we *humble our selves*, empty ourselves to become *servants* of God, like Moses, we learn that this journey we are all on, actually, isn't about arriving at all, but instead it is about participating in what God is calling us to do at this time. That would be the time we are present in now, the time we walk on this earth, and hear God's call to us. Think how many people inside and outside scripture we have known and read about that have participated in this type of kingdom participation. This idea of participating in the kingdom life, that we now are living in is what theologian Diana Butler Bass calls participating in bringing about God's harmony.¹

You see Moses did not need to nor did he worry about crossing over the Jordan because he already had crossed over by participating in God's harmonic plan when God first called him. He had already given himself to God, beginning way back at the moment where he first encountered God in the burning bush, and was transformed. It was at that moment, that time, when he said, yes God, I will begin to participate in bringing about God's harmony. Yes, I will follow you, and give myself and become part of the whole story.

Bringing about God's harmony is about asking, where the River Jordan is running through our lives: in us, in the world and here at the corner of Jefferson and Tyler. It is about coming to the river of transformation that is always present in our lives, and deciding if we will cross over. And, bringing about God's harmony is about us deciding if we will take what God is saying into our hearts, listening to what is already inscribed on our hearts and cross over, like Moses and *Joshua* after him, and participate in the whole harmony of kingdom life, which is God's greatest hope for us.

Participation is not about glory or *exaltation*. But instead, participation is about *humbling ourselves*, it is to remember that we are in relationship with God who wants us to participate in the conversation, to know God, to hear God, which is how we make and build the whole kingdom in this time that we are called to.

It is what Jesus means, I think, in today's gospel when he reminds us that *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted*. That is if we *humbly* participate, we will be transformed beyond our wildest and woolly dreams. And, what could, what will we look like then? It can happen, it is not an illusion, because it happened to Moses, to Joshua, to Israel, to Mary and Joseph, to Elizabeth and her son John the Baptist, to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, to C. S. Lewis and Maya Angelou, to Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa, and many people we know ourselves who have *humbly* participated when they were called by God, many in our presence right now.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, pg. 56

This problem of whether we chose to *humble ourselves or glorify ourselves* is really what Jesus is all spun up about as he describes the unseemly behavior of *the scribes and Pharisees* and their preoccupation and *glorifying* of themselves. Like the wandering children of Israel, they have lost their way; they are distracted with other things, primarily with themselves. They have forgotten that they were called to *humble* themselves, and participate in the whole, in the harmonic dance of kingdom life. Do you know that Pharisee means-separatist? That would mean to be outside the whole, forgetting they are in relationship, in conversation with God.

And I think what sounds like an angry and irritated Jesus as he reacts to those who have separated themselves from the whole is not an angry condemning reaction at all. Instead, what we are hearing is Jesus' heart breaking because for all he has been through with them and all he has tried to teach them, in all the ways he has *humbled* himself, many of them have not tapped in to the river Jordan that is running through their lives at all. And perhaps even more painful, many of them have forgotten what it is like to be in love with God, what it feels like when we participate in that harmonic dance that God yearns for us to be in. Do you know what I mean? Can we remember what it felt like the first time we knew we were in love with God? Do we remember what it felt like to know we belonged to the whole of God?

We are in this kingdom, this dance together you know, and that of course is what being in harmony means: an interweaving of single accounts into one account, into one whole story that makes us whole. It sounds like a gathering together to me, which is exactly what we will do in a few moments as we gather our gifts this ingathering Sunday, which will make our whole here on the corner of Jefferson and Tyler. When we gather together and as say, yes God, we will follow you and become part of the whole story. Yes God, we want to cross over the river into your arms and dance the harmonic dance, of dances that is only found in following and *humbly* serving you.