

### ***Crossing Over with Jesus***

In the name of our risen Lord and Savior, dear friends in Christ: Well, we finally made it. We have come to the end of the journey that we began on Ash Wednesday. Throughout the 40 days of Lent in our midweek devotions we have been traveling with the Israelites as they, led by the Lord, made their way from Egypt where they were slaves to where we find them (at long last) this morning: poised on the edge of the Jordan River and crossing over into the Promised Land. Forty long years it has taken them – not because it takes that much time to walk from Egypt to Canaan, but because of their unfaithfulness. They had the opportunity to go in and take possession of the land many years before; but they were afraid of the Canaanites who lived there. They didn't believe the Lord's promise to fight their battles for them and give them the land.

So he sent that faithless generation back into the desert, there to die. "I will give the land to your children" he told them. And so that is what's been happening for the last 40 years. That older, stubborn generation that was unwilling to trust the Lord has been dying out, and a new generation has been slowly taking its place. Overall, it's a picture of every Christian's life: how we are through daily contrition and repentance to put to death the old man so that the Spirit may raise up in us a new man who walks in faith and trust and strives to do God's will.

Our lifetime in the desert began, as you recall, with the crossing of the Red Sea, which we saw foreshadowed Christian Baptism. Just as Israel passed through the sea to be reborn a free nation, so a Christian's life begins by being united with Christ in water and reborn a child of God. As our life in the desert comes to its end, we find another water obstacle must be crossed. This corresponds to a Christian's death. That's what we must pass through to enter into the eternal Promised Land.

We find the Jordan River at flood stage. Like most desert streams, for the majority of the year there's not much to it. It can be easily forded in many places. But in the spring it's swollen by snow melting off of Mount Hermon and other mountains to the north. To enter the river now would mean being swept away and drowned. This is fitting, because as I said, this water represents death, the river that we all must cross over to get to the Promised Land. Perhaps another analogy can be drawn from the fact that it is a desert stream: most of the time we don't think about death, so it's no big deal. But then comes the day when you're staring it in the face. Then it's the only thing you can think about. And it can be quite frightening.

We've had a change of leadership. Moses who has led Israel all these years has died. The Lord allowed him to climb to the peak of Pisgah and view the land; but he was not permitted to enter it. Why? On one occasion not long before this he failed to do *exactly* as the Lord commanded him. This too is a lesson for us. Though Moses performed many roles including that of being the deliverer of God's people (and therefore at times a Christ figure in the storyline), he is known chiefly as the giver of the Law. His name is virtually synonymous with the Law. And that's the point: the Law can show us the Promised Land. It tells us "keep the commandments and you will live". But violate the commands at any point, even once, and you will surely die. Moses, the Law, cannot lead us sinners into the Promised Land. If we rely on the Law to get us in, that is, our own righteousness and record of good works, we will surely be swept away to destruction.

But as I indicated, the Lord has given us a new leader. His name is Joshua, which not coincidentally is the Hebrew pronunciation of the name we know as “Jesus”. It means “the Lord saves”. And so he does. Jesus is the only one who can lead us safely into the Promised Land.

In this episode, however, it’s not the man named Joshua who leads the way, but rather the Ark of the Covenant, which is carried by four Levitical priests. And to fully appreciate the spiritual truths being presented in this narrative, we need to spend some time reviewing exactly what the Ark was. In simplest terms, it was a box made of acacia wood and overlaid inside and out with gold. It was not quite four feet long, a little over 2 feet wide, and the same measure high. On its top cover, which was called “the mercy seat”, were two cherubim made of gold facing inward toward each other. Four golden rings were attached to the Ark’s sides so that poles could be passed through them for carrying it when traveling. So, that’s the Ark in simplest terms.

But it was much more than a gold-covered box. It was far and away the most holy of the sacred objects the Lord directed Moses to have constructed for furnishing the Tabernacle – the Lord’s dwelling place on earth. It was the locus of the Lord’s presence with his people. When the Tabernacle was set up, the Ark alone was placed in the innermost chamber called the Holy of Holies. Above it hovered a visible manifestation of God’s glory called the Shekinah. When it was time for the Israelites to move, the Shekinah would depart from the Tabernacle, and the Lord would take up his station as the cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night. Then when the Lord decided it was time to set up a new camp, the cloud would stop, the Tabernacle would be set up, and the Shekinah would return to its place above the Ark. In general then, when the Israelites were encamped you could point to wherever the Ark was and say, “That’s where the Lord our God is. There is where he dwells with us in a tent of skin.”

The Ark contained three sacred items. There was first a bowl full of Manna, the heavenly bread that the Lord miraculously provided for his people every day during their time in the desert. It spoke of the Lord’s daily care for his people, how he sustained them throughout all their travels with what they needed to live. But this was special Manna. The regular stuff decayed and became full of maggots if anyone tried to store it; but this was incorruptible Manna. It never decayed.

Secondly, placed inside the Ark was Aaron’s staff. This is the staff that was changed to a snake before the Pharaoh, and that ate the snakes his magicians conjured up by sleight of hand. It’s the staff that struck the Nile and changed its water to blood, and that struck the earth to bring forth frogs, mosquitoes, and lice in the ten plagues. It’s the staff that was held aloft to part the Red Sea. In these things the staff of Aaron stood for the miracles of salvation by which the Lord delivered his people from their cruel bondage.

There was more to it, though. When it came time for the Lord to choose who would be appointed the high priest, he directed Moses to have the head of each tribe bring his staff to the Tabernacle. Aaron’s staff was among them. They were placed in the holy place overnight. In the morning, they found that the staff of Aaron had sprouted leaves and even produced ripe almonds. By this the Lord indicated Aaron was to serve as high priest. So the staff of Aaron also speaks of the high priesthood, the Lord’s appointed mediator between man and God. And finally, because the lifeless staff became alive – that speaks of resurrection, life from death.

The final items placed in the Ark were the second tablets of stone that the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai. Recall that the first set was smashed to pieces when Moses returned to the camp during the golden calf episode. The second set was just like them, written on front and back by the finger of God. It’s often believed that only the Ten Commandments were

written on these tablets; but that's not correct. It's true, God's Law was written on them; but there also appeared the words of the covenant: all the Lord's instructions for the priesthood and the Tabernacle and how Israel was to worship. On them were written the instructions for the sacrifices by which God forgave the sins of his people. So, in Lutheran terms, they contained both Law and Gospel – the whole counsel and covenant of God. They were in physical form: God's Word made tangible. And written on stone because the Word of the Lord cannot be changed.

Okay, so we know what the Ark was, what it meant to God's people, and what was in it. The last thing we need to know is how it was used in worship. Daily sacrifices were offered at the Tabernacle for the sins of the people. The blood of these sacrifices was poured out on the blazing altar that stood in front of the tent. The idea was that because the life is in the blood, and the Lord requires lives for sin, the lives of the substitute sacrifices together with the sins of his people were being transferred to the altar – and by extension, to the whole Tabernacle. That is to say, the Lord's house became full of the people's sins. Or even better, the Lord was taking his peoples' sin on himself.

Then, once a year, on what was called the Day of Atonement, a special house cleaning ritual took place. The accumulated sins of his people were to be taken away completely. This was the one day that the high priest – and only the high priest – was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies while the Ark was in its place and the Shekinah, God's glory, was present above it. The high priest would go in with the blood of a specially chosen sacrifice, one to make atonement for a whole year's worth of sins. The blood was poured out on the top of the Ark, the mercy seat. The idea was that the Lord, his presence in the Shekinah, would look down on the top of the Ark, see his Law contained within that had been violated – but now covered by the blood. Thus the price paid. The Law satisfied. And all is well between God and man. So, in all this, the Ark speaks of atonement, the Lord covering and taking away the sins of his people.

All this about the Ark is a lot to consider; but what I really want you to see is that it's all about Jesus. He is the most holy One. He is the locus of God's presence with his people. He is God living with us in skin. He is also the Bread of Life from heaven. His body is heavenly food that we may eat and live forever. And his flesh is incorruptible. He cannot decay.

Jesus is the one who works the miracles of our salvation. He is our great high priest. And he is the resurrection and the life.

He is God's Word made tangible – not in stone, but in flesh. And he is the One who takes our sins upon himself and makes atonement for them by his passion and death. Everything about the Ark speaks of the person of Jesus and his saving work on our behalf. And just one more thing; it has to do with the word "ark". You see, the word we translate as ark, is not the same, as one might guess, as the one used for Noah's ark. No, the Hebrew word that is used for the Ark of the Covenant is elsewhere used for a box that you bury a body in, a casket or a coffin. But it would sound a bit awkward to refer to the Coffin of the Covenant, so translators go with the word "ark".

Maybe they shouldn't, because if everything about the Ark speaks of Jesus, then a coffin speaks of his death. This is what we see in today's text: the Ark is Jesus entering death before us. As soon as he does, he opens the way. The water of death that threatens us stops flowing. It's now safe to cross over into the Promised Land – as long as Jesus is holding back death for us. All God's people cross over to the Promised Land with Jesus. And when the Ark comes out of the river, the way through death closes up again. You can only cross over with Jesus.

Today we proclaim and celebrate his victory for us over sin and death by which he opened for us the way through death to everlasting life. Because he died for us, we need not fear death. And because he lives, we know that we too shall live; live with him and all the faithful in the eternal Promised Land.

That will bring us to the end of our time in the desert, but not to the end of our story. Thanks be to Jesus, that's a story that has no end.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed. Alleluia!]

***Soli Deo Gloria!***