

## Worn Out Calvin Declines

### FIRST READING JOSHUA 3:7-17

<sup>7</sup>The 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.”<sup>8</sup>You 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.”<sup>9</sup>Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.”<sup>10</sup>Joshua 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: <sup>11</sup>the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. <sup>12</sup>So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. <sup>13</sup>When 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.”

<sup>14</sup>When 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. <sup>15</sup>Now 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, <sup>16</sup>the 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. <sup>17</sup>While 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.

When I was a boy and would spend summers with my grandparents in Pennsylvania one of my favorite things in the world was to read this old paperback science book that was my Uncle Ken's. It was from the 50's, the paper was getting yellowed and brittle. And I'm quite sure a lot of the concepts were completely out of date. But I just loved it. I was 12 and 13, and every night I'd just read through that book, and it would just completely blow my mind. For instance, this is something you all know but probably don't think much about. You all know that your body is composed of cells, and your cells are made up of molecules, and those molecules are made up of atoms. Right. So far, so good. But the atom- now the atom is a crazy thing. The atom is like 99.99 percent nothing. Yeah, there's just this tiny little nucleus with protons and neutrons, and around this nucleus in these valence shells are flying really, really tiny electrons. This book said to get an understanding of this on our scale you have to imagine a tennis ball in

the middle of a huge sports stadium. A tennis ball in the middle of a huge sports stadium. Well, the tennis ball is the nucleus, and then at the very outside edge of the stadium- that's where the rice grain sized electrons would start. And then imagine nothing else- just a tennis ball with teensy, tiny little electrons way far away- that's an atom. And that's what makes up you, and me...and everything made out of matter. As solid as you feel- we're really mostly not here. And yes, I have noticed this is more true of some of us than others on Sunday mornings depending on your level of alertness. 😊

What I loved about this book is even though it was describing the world around me- it was the world as I never saw it before. It opened my eyes to seeing the world in a totally different and new way.

And, I think this is why I like the Bible so much, because it's pretty much the same thing. On the one hand the Bible is describing a lot of the same things you and I see- it describes the earth, it describes rivers; it talks about people. But the way these are described- well it can be a really, really strange place.

For instance let's water. Water has an unusual habit of parting in the Bible. If you just went around asking folks to name a body of water that gets parted in the Bible, if people could name anything- no doubt they'd probably say the red sea. Maybe they saw the ten commandments or something with Charlton Heston, the wind in his hair, his arms raised up really high- and the Hollywood effects creating two great walls of water allowing the Israelites to pass.

Nearly everyone knows that Moses parts the Red Sea, but I bet you hardly anybody remembers that just after Moses dies another body of water gets parted- the Jordan river. And not only does the Jordan part here, but later in 2 Kings the prophet Elijah is walking along with

his little side kick, Elisha, and when they come to the river Elijah rolls up his outer cloak, his mantle, and smacks the river with it and it parts. Then, after a fiery chariot comes and takes him away, he drops his mantle, and Elisha picks up it, hence the expression 'picking up the mantle', and he goes back and parts the river a second time. Yeah, in the Bible water is just getting parted all over the place- and to me it's like my uncle's old physics book. It's enough like my world for me to recognize it, but it's enough different to make me scratch my head and wonder what's going on.

So what is going on with this story this morning? Well, the important thing about all these river crossings is not whether you think they happened or not. The most important question, if we want to understand the Bible, is not asking whether it happened. The writers of Scripture aren't really excited over whether these waters part- they assume stuff like this happens all the time. The important thing is not asking whether this happened- the important thing to understand these stories is to ask *how* it's being described. How, *exactly*, did this time compare to the others? How, for instance, is what happened here with Joshua different than what happened with Moses?

And this is interesting indeed. See, Moses, the great leader of the Jewish people, the man who led the people out of Egypt, the man who saw God face to face- Moses stretches his hand out over the sea. And the text says that all night long as Moses stretched his hand out, the Lord drove against the waters with a strong East wind and divided the waters until there was dry ground. So, it's not EXACTLY like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments. I mean he just raises his arms up and the water parts. For the real Moses it took all night. But the important

thing is- when the Israelites all woke up refreshed in the morning ready for a brand new day, there before them was the sea, with walls of water on each side and dry land in between. When they crossed over, they could see that God had parted the waters for them. Before stepping out, they knew, they could see the path on which they were headed.

But not with Joshua. Not by a long shot. See, Joshua is no Moses. Like whoever is going to try and run Apple after Steve Jobs, Joshua has the unenviable job of stepping into the sandals of Moses- and those were big sandals indeed.

And Joshua is supposed to take up where Moses left off. Joshua's first task is to do the one thing that Moses couldn't do: take the people into the promised land. And the first thing God tells Joshua is that Joshua is going to part the Jordan just like Moses parted the Red Sea- only it isn't going to be exactly like it was the first time. Joshua is supposed to approach the Jordan, and while it's not a huge river, it's in flood stage, the text says- it's overflowing it's banks. He's supposed to get into it, and then the people, not knowing what's going to happen- they're supposed to try and cross as well? This isn't leadership- this is suicide!

With Moses, Moses could just raise his arms up and stretch them out over that water and the spirit of God would just blow and blow- and everybody was able to see exactly where they were supposed to step.

But Joshua's not Moses. Joshua is not Moses. Joshua had to get into the water. And then the priests had to get in. Only when the priests get in, too- only then does the river part.

Joshua could do it. Joshua could part a river just like Moses could- but Joshua had to do it differently. He didn't raise up his hands. He didn't have like magical air hands that could blow an east wind all night. He had to wade out into that water. And he didn't do it alone. That

water didn't part when he got out there. It only parted when he had convinced some other crazies to get in with him. Joshua was able to do what Moses could- but he had to find his own way. He had to figure out how Joshua was supposed to make this happen- not Joshua pretending to be like Moses.

Well, it's Reformation Sunday. This is a day we remember that none of us are here on our own. None of us by ourselves could have built this beautiful church and organized the leadership in such a way that ministry took place before our time, and ministry will continue in this place, God willing, long, long after we are gone. Reformation Sunday is the day to remember that this congregation is not entirely ours. We gather here as stewards, caretakers, inheritors of a great tradition, a long tradition.

Our tradition, the Reformed tradition, owes an enormous debt to John Calvin. Now, in case you're confused by the term 'Reformed', it's one of those words you hear a lot but it's never defined. Anyone who has gone through officer training with me knows the sock drawer analogy to understanding Reformation history. Basically, the Reformation can be broken down into four simple groups ordered according to how they would clean out their sock drawer. So, for instance, the Roman Catholic church did some cleaning during the Reformation. There was this huge movement called the Counter-Reformation and they had a 15 year council called the Council of Trent. And they actually agreed with a lot of the criticisms Luther had, but for the most part- they were very conservative when it came to cleaning out the sock drawer. Most of the socks they saw, even the ones that had some holes in them, they said- you know, they're just socks. Who is going to care- and so they only took out the worst of the worst. Now the Lutheran wing, they were more thorough going. They actually pulled the whole sock drawer out

of the dresser. They didn't just slide it out a little. And they sorted through and threw out quite a few more socks. But they also retained a lot- for instance much Lutheranism in look and feel retains some of the old ways. Lutherans have bishops, for instance. The Lutheran liturgy was still referred to in Luther's day as a mass. The liturgy is often much more formal. So then there's the Reformed wing of the Reformation- and this took place mainly in Switzerland. The Reformed types not only took the sock drawer out, but they turned it upside down and dumped all the socks out. And they only put back in the few socks they thought were really decent. So, the Reformed wing made even more changes- and admittedly sometimes got carried away. Some of the darkest moments in our history included riots when crowds of Reformed Christians stormed into these beautiful, medieval churches and just ransacked them in the name of theological purity. Finally, the fourth wing are the Anabaptists. These are the heirs of the Mennonites and the Amish today. The Anabaptists took all the socks out, dumped them on the floor, and decided if Jesus didn't wear socks- they wouldn't either.

So Presbyterians are part of the Reformed wing- and John Calvin is really the father of that. Born in 1509, Calvin, like Joshua, was not a first generation leader. When Calvin was 10 and just figuring out the ways of the world Luther was 40 and was already turning the world on it's head. The Reformation not only in full swing by the time Calvin hit college- but the Counter-Reformation was already working to suppress the Reformation and Protestants themselves were beginning to fall into disarray. They were beginning to fight amongst themselves and were getting hungry for new leadership. They were getting hungry for a new Luther.

After a terrifying crack down in Paris where he was in college in 1530, Calvin ran for his life with his brother and sister, Antoine and Marie. Wanting nothing to do with this older

generation's war, Calvin just wanted to find a quiet place to hide out and become a quiet scholar. Tired and afraid, they passed through Geneva. Somehow, a fiery preacher, William Farel, discovered Calvin was there. And he paid a visit and told the young man that God was calling him, Calvin, to become a leader right there in Geneva. Calvin declined. But Farel didn't give up. In moment Calvin never forgot the old man visited again, pointed his bony finger in Calvin's young face and roared that if he didn't become a leader that God would curse him for the rest of his quiet life.

And maybe it was because he was exhausted? Or afraid of God or afraid of Farel, but Calvin- finally said yes. He agreed to becoming the pastor in Geneva. And he had such an impact that we still talk about him today- but only because he did not become what Farel and others were hoping for at first. Calvin did not become another Luther. Calvin became Calvin- as different from Luther as you can imagine.

Whereas Luther responded to every situation and fired off hundreds of short theological pieces like a shotgun, Calvin really only wrote one major book- a small, practical guide to the faith called *The Institutes*. It was a book he wrote and rewrote throughout his entire life- publishing five different editions. And whereas Luther was passionate and funny, flying off the handle a lot of time and calling the pope the anti-Christ, Calvin was exceedingly calm and quiet. At one point the the Genevans kicked him out because they didn't like all the things he was asking them to do. After three years they had a problem, and they asked him, begged him to come back. Now before they kicked him out, Calvin had been preaching *lectio continua*, meaning he was just preaching through the Bible verse by verse. When he came back, he didn't preach a huge, giant I told you so kind of sermon. He didn't go off on them like Luther probably

would. He simply and quietly picked up right at the verse where he had left off, preaching as though nothing had ever happened.

Like Joshua in relation to Moses, Calvin was successful because he didn't try to become Luther- he thrived because he became more of who he already was. And as it happened this was exactly what the world needed anyway. The church needed Luther's energy and passion in the beginning- but later, the people needed Calvin's calm organizing mind to transform itself into a lasting movement.

All this makes me wonder about you. It makes me wonder who God has fashioned you to be- what gift it is that you have that absolutely no one else here has, exactly. Of course the pressures against actually being this person, against being yourself, are enormous- so often who we really are is either threatening or embarrassing or both to those closest to us, including ourselves. Especially ourselves. So often we'd just give anything to be like someone else. Who we really are, what really interests us, the kinds of people we really find attractive, the kinds of thoughts we actually think- so often we feel if anyone knew, really knew the real us, well there would be no way we could show our faces.

And yet, God made you. You. Strange thoughts and rough edges included. And God has set you down in this particular place. And on this particular day. Indeed, for such a time as this. And I believe the greatest adventure in all the world is, in the words of George Eliot, becoming who you already are.

I leave you with the words of Mary Oliver from her poem "The Journey":

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,

though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

Do you know your own voice? Does it keep you company? If all the other voices in  
your life fell away- would you be able to recognize your own? **Amen.**