

# Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

© American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region  
e-Current 100113

*We held our annual staff retreat last week. As you can imagine, we had a lot of difficult things to discuss given the way 2009 concluded. As usual, we took turns leading the opening devotion for each day, and, not surprisingly, each of our devotions addressed our challenges in different ways. John Grisham used the crossing of the Jordan as recorded in Joshua 3. I gladly give him credit for the inspiration for this essay.*

It had been forty years since Moses was startled by a burning bush. Forty years since he led a sometimes reluctant band of followers out of Egypt in response to God's fiery call. Forty years since God confronted the authority of Pharaoh and the power of the Egyptian pantheon. Forty years since the dividing of the Red Sea and the giving of the Ten Commandments. Also, forty years since the Golden Calf, and the failed first attempt to enter Canaan. Forty years since God said all but Joshua and Caleb "will die in this desert." (**Numbers 14**).

Now, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, Moses and everyone who crossed the Red Sea with him were dead. And these children of the desert were preparing for another water crossing. In getting ready, Joshua said to them "You have never been this way before." (**Joshua 3:4**)

Like many of you, I have seen the Jordan "river." Normally the Jordan does not meet the Midwestern standard of "river." Even the Sangamon is more impressive. But the seasons have a definite impact on the size of the Jordan. The story recorded in Joshua 3 makes note that the Jordan was in flood stage because it was harvest season. This would have been April/May, and the melting snow and ice from the mountain range with Mount Hermon in the North, would have been surging down the Jordan valley toward the Dead Sea.

While the swollen Jordan may not have rivaled the Mississippi, it was impressive—and dangerous—to these children of the desert. They had heard about God leading their parents across the Red Sea. But that was a long time ago in a place far away.

I wonder what it was like in the camp. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb they did not know life on the other side of the Red Sea. Had God's faithful provision of food created a sense of godly dependence—or unholy entitlement? Did the stories of rebellion and failure result in humility, guilt, fear or anger? I suspect all these were present.

Some were eager to go—ready to erase the failures of their parents. Some were tired of living like vagabonds and wanted to try a more settled way of life. Some were itching for a fight, and anticipated there would be plenty of it in Canaan. Some wanted to be faithful to God's call. Some were afraid—not only of the swollen Jordan but what lay on the other side. Some were satisfied living on manna and quail.

Despite the probable range of emotions, they held one thing in common. None of them had been this way before. Not even Joshua.

Many churches are faced with a similar situation. They may not have been wandering in a desert 40 years, but today they are confronted with a "river crossing" into a land they have not seen before. They have lived on God's provision for so long that they have begun to take it for granted. They remember the stories of glorious things, but ... none of them have been this way before. Not even their pastor.

Most definitely, the Region faces this situation. 175 years ago, John Mason Peck convened the first statewide gathering of Baptists in Illinois to advance the Kingdom of God. There was early opposition. There have been fits and starts along the way. While we have been adjusting, responding, anticipating for at least 15 years, it is clear that we stand on the bank of a Jordan River in flood stage today. The crossing looks dangerous. We are not entirely sure what we will find on the other side. Truly, none of us have been this way before.

Some want to go full speed ahead. Some are afraid. Some are loathe to leave anything behind. Some are satisfied with the way things are. But none have been this way before.

At this point, Joshua's story is both instructive and counter-intuitive.

First, Joshua said, WAIT. We are going to camp out here for three days. We are not just going to barge on. As children, most of us learned to "stop, look and listen" at dangerous crossings.

Second, Joshua said, CONSECRATE YOURSELVES. Use this season not just to kill time, or build boats, or strategize military conquest, but to renew your relationship with God.

Third, Joshua said, MOVE WHEN AND WHERE GOD MOVES. This may be the hardest lesson! In this short chapter, the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned eight times. The Ark was not merely a holy relic or good luck charm; it was symbolic of the presence of God among the covenant people. While priests carried the Ark, the focus of the people was on the Ark, not the ones carrying it.

Fourth, Joshua did not promise a dry-land crossing. Consequently, DON'T BE AFRAID TO GET WET. When the feet of the priests carrying the Ark touched the water's edge, then—and only then—the river stopped flowing. Joshua had promised that "the Lord will do amazing things among you." But he never promised what! The "amazing thing" happened when the priests stepped into the water. What a powerful lesson of obedience.

Can we step into the surging water, fully expecting God to do amazing things in 2010, but never completely sure exactly what that amazing thing might be?

