

October 30, 2011
Proper 26, A
Joshua 3:7-17

After Moses had been called by God to lead the Israelites up out of Egypt, and after he had interceded on their behalf to find water and food in the desert, and after he had wandered around with them for 40 years filled with grumbling and complaining and rebellion.... after all of that faithful service, God took Moses up the mountain and showed him what he had been waiting his whole life to see: the Promised Land. But Moses wasn't allowed by God to go to that place. He was only allowed to see it. Then Moses died.

And it was Joshua, Moses's successor, a new generation of leader, who led the people into their inheritance. That's where we join this ancient story today, in the selection that Marilyn read for us from chapter 3 of the book of Joshua. In order to cross into the Promised Land the people must cross the Jordan river.

And what happens? JOSHUA THEN SAID TO THE ISRAELTES, 'DRAW NEAR AND HEAR THE WORDS OF THE LORD YOUR GOD.... BY THIS YOU SHALL KNOW THAT AMONG YOU IS THE LIVING GOD... THE ARK OF THE COVENANT OF THE LORD OF ALL THE EARTH IS GOING TO PASS BEFORE YOU INTO THE JORDAN.

This is great theater, great drama. The people, with their hearts longing for the Promised Land, gather on the riverbank. The priests carry the ark, which has the 10 commandments in it, the presence of God, out into the water. 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, THE WATERS FLOWING FROM ABOVE STOOD STILL, RISING UP IN A SINGLE HEAP FAR OFF ... WHILE THOSE FLOWING TOWARD THE SEA.. WERE WHOLLY CUT OFF... 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.

Can you see it? Can you see the people longing? Can you see the priests in their long gowns, their long white robes processing forward with dignity, bearing the precious box on their shoulders? Can you see the amazing stretch of dry ground, and the valiant priests standing firm with the waters piled up on one side of them? Can you see the faithful people, the humble people, the grateful people passing by, awestruck, as the priests hold back the waters, by the power of God and the strength of the ark? Can you see them safely reaching the Promised Land?

This is Music Awareness Sunday. Each year at the end of October we set aside one of our services of worship to celebrate the tremendous gift of our music program here at FSA. And so we glory in a special anthem, and we are lifted out of our seats by the strings, and we are taken to heaven's gate by the children's sweet voices, and we are awestruck by the beauty and grace of the bell choir. It's a day of feasting for all of us who love music.

I have been thinking all week about what music does in our souls. I have been thinking about

what happens inside of us when we come to church on Sunday morning, each of us straggling in, trailing wisps of our lives behind us – worries, joys, stresses, losses – I have been thinking about how we gather here as a ragged group of individuals until our opening hymn begins. And we rise together. And we open our books to the same page – each of us, to the same page. And we all take one breath in and we sing. We sing together. And all those voices, and breaths and lips and hearts and stories become one. We become one congregation – one people – through that song. It’s like wading into the Jordan river – where the turbulent waters of life might sweep us away – it’s like wading in with the ark of song on our shoulders, and passing safely through to the other side.

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.

Maybe that’s the choir. Think of our choir, in their burgundy robes, as the phalanx of priests walking bravely into those roiling waters. Each Thursday night they gather here, when most of us are rushing about driving kids to ringette practice, or lining up at the supermarket with the latest buggy of food. But the choir members come each week, week in and week out – Paul is very strict about attendance – so that they can give the gift each Sunday: many voices, strong voices, weak voices, confident voices, well-trained voices, tentative voices, all lifted up, each offering as each is able, so that from the many kinds of voices, soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, bass, one beautiful sound is created – like seeds thrown down into the earth, each voice must be surrendered so that the song may be created. It is a sacrifice – no one is an individual in the choir – but it is joyfully made, I know. And from their sacrifice we are all made strong. As they wade out into the waters on our behalf each week, we follow along behind, so that we may cross the Jordan safely to gain the promised land.

But there is even more than that. More than the glory of us becoming one in our hymns; and more than the glory of the choir offering their gift of beauty to strengthen our spirits. Joshua says to the people: **BY THIS YOU SHALL KNOW THAT AMONG YOU IS THE LIVING GOD. BY THIS YOU SHALL KNOW THAT AMONG YOU IS THE LIVING GOD....**

There is something about music that brings God near. I read a story about that, written down by Wayne Muller in his book, *How Then Shall We Live?* (1) Here it is:

Bob, a pediatric nurse, works with terminally ill children in the hospital. He told me about one little girl with cancer. Her name was Emily. Emily loved playing with Bob. She felt safe with him, and they soon became fast friends. Once in a while Emily would speak of the time when Chucky Lee was going to come. Bob didn’t know Chucky Lee, but he assumed he was a friend or member of her family. One day, after she had repeatedly mentioned Chucky Lee, Bob asked her to tell him about Chucky Lee. “Chucky Lee comes to see me sometimes,” said Emily. She was quiet for a moment. “Chucky Lee,” she finally continued, “is death. Someday Chucky Lee will come and take me away.”

Emily had personified death into a character she could understand. “Are you frightened of Chucky Lee?” Bob asked her. “Yes, very much,” Emily replied. “But he mostly comes at night. That’s when I see him.” Bob was moved by her clarity and innocence.

He wanted to protect her, to shield her from such sorrow. “At night, when you feel Chucky Lee coming, is there anything you can do to feel better?” Bob asked. “Oh yes,” Emily replied brightly. “You have to sing ‘Jingle Bells’ and other love songs.” After that, whenever Bob saw Emily, he would ask her about the night before. How was she doing? “Well,” Emily would reply with a conspiratorial whisper, “I had to sing ‘Jingle Bells’ three times last night - very loud.”

For Emily it was Jingle Bells. For me it’s Wild Mountain Thyme. Maybe for you it’s the Duet from The Pearl Fishers, or hymn #575. Maybe you have a melody, a song, a piece of music that never fails to bring you to that thin place where heaven touches close to earth, and God’s breath caresses the hairs on the back of your neck.

Some say that earth is full of angels’ wings – and that’s a lovely thought. Others believe that the spirits of loved ones gather close about them – another lovely thought. I wonder whether music itself isn’t one of the messengers of God – that is what *angelos* means, after all - sent to keep us safe in the raging waters of life, sent so that we might pass safely through to the promised land, sent so that we might know **THAT AMONG US IS THE LIVING GOD**. Amen.

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew’s United Church, London, Ont.
www.fsaunited.com)

(1) Muller, Wayne. *How, Then, Shall We Live?: Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*. (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1996), p. 203.