This is my command to you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. --- Joshua 1:9

Well, here we are. Now, I don't know about you, but this is not what I expected when Amy first approached me last spring about coming to St. Anne’s. I thought God had worked out a pretty sweet deal for me. I was going to work in a much larger church, one rich in resources and ministry. I was going to work with two fantastic priests, a major plus when you’ve been flying solo as I had been for the last 9½ years. And, as an added bonus, I wasn’t going to be in charge, or, as I like to say, “I wasn’t going to drive the bus.” I’d be sitting in back, doing my ministry and enjoying the ride. If any major problem came up, I had the perfect answer: Go ask Amy. I’m just the assistant priest.

So, you can imagine I was more than a little stunned when Amy sat me down and told me her news the afternoon before most of you learned about it in an e-blast. I don’t know how you all responded, but I went home that night and had a long talk with my dog, Coco.

“Coco,” I said, “now I specifically asked her about this. Back in the spring. When we were first talking. I asked her: ‘Now, I’m not going to come there and six months later you’re going to go off and be a bishop or something?’ ‘Oh no,’ she said.”

I looked at Coco. “You see, I specifically asked her.”

Coco cocked her head to one side as if to say: “You’re right, Dion. You asked her.”

Well, here we are, just about six months to the day since I started. And what can we say, but, God is always working, calling us sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, into something new and unexpected. And that’s why this morning I’m going to take a little detour from our lectionary. I usually start my sermon preparation with this prayer: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

This week the Lord laid a word on my heart and directed me to one of the great stories of the Old Testament – the Hebrew children at the Jordan River. You can find it in the 34th chapter of Deuteronomy and in the first four chapters of Joshua. The story is instructive because it finds the people at a point in their history when they are forced to contemplate how far they’ve come; who they are at this point in time; and where they are going. Sound familiar? They look back on how far they’ve come; discern who they are; and with eyes pointed across the Jordan River look to where they are going.

We begin with the passing of Moses, the prophet who brought them out of Egypt. The people are at the Jordan, but they do not cross over. They mourn. Just as we have to take some time to grieve our loss. Here’s what the scripture says: “The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.” – Deuteronomy 34:9
The length of time isn’t what’s most important here, but the process. They had to mourn before they could even think about crossing the Jordan River. Tears had to be shed and good times had to be remembered.

Then the story turns to Joshua, whom the Lord had commissioned years earlier with these words: “Be strong and be courageous.” – Deuteronomy 31:23

Now, he had big shoes to fill. Even though he had been prepared for this moment, there probably was a little hesitation, perhaps some wariness. After all, everyone was looking to him. Where was he to turn? Who could he lean on?

Hear the word of the Lord from Joshua 1:8 – “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous and then you shall be successful.” In other words, stay close to God. Stay close to Christ.

This is part two of our story. In part one they mourned for Moses. In part two the new leader was strengthened and reassured. But they are still not ready to cross over. The people have to be prepared. They have to understand the deep meaning of their undertaking.

Early one morning they set out from Shittim and made their final approach. This time they camped for three days of prayer and instruction. Again, it’s not the amount of time that’s important. What’s important is the process. They needed prayer and instruction, some time for discernment. As the appointed time, Joshua’s lieutenants went through the camp and gave the people this command: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.” – Joshua 3:3-4

The ark of the covenant; the presence of the Lord in the midst of them. Joshua was told to keep the book of the law always on his heart. The people are told to keep their eyes on the ark of the covenant, just as we are called to keep our eyes on Christ, his cross and his word. Why? Because we have not passed this way before. Yes, we have all been through changes. Priests have come and priests have gone. But we gathered here today have not passed this way before. This is why discernment is so important. Who are we now? Who is here now? All of this introspection has to happen before we cross over.

Scripture tells us there was yet another phase in their preparation. “Sanctify yourselves,” Joshua said, “for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.” – Joshua 3:5

Sanctify yourselves! This is a holy endeavor. And we are God’s holy people, his living temple, called to proclaim his glorious gospel to the world.

Now, they are ready to cross over. But they river doesn’t stop flowing until they put their feet in the water. You see, you have to step out on faith. Then the priests go in, standing in the river, holding the ark of the covenant. The story says the entire nation crossed over. Some probably charged over, ready for the new thing. Some might have held back, wary. They might have asked: Is this really going to work out as the Lord said? Still others might have sat down and said: Didn’t the Lord say he would raise up a prophet like Moses? Well, Joshua surely isn’t who he meant. Y’all go on ahead. I’ll wait here until the real prophet comes along.
No, no no. The Lord wasn’t having that. The entire nation, every man, woman and child, every doubter and every strong believer; all of them crossed over. And when everyone was safely on the other side, then the priests crossed over with the ark of the Lord. You see, the priests didn’t go running off ahead of the people. They were the last ones. And not until they stepped out did the river start flowing again.

The story of the Hebrew children at the Jordan River shows us a truly spiritual process. First, they grieved; then they prepared; then they crossed. They considered the road traveled; their sense of self and their desires; and the future God had prepared for them.

Brothers and sisters, this is an ever-repeating cycle. We are always traveling and crossing, traveling and crossing; mourning one leader and embracing another. I am reminded of these words from the General Thanksgiving found on page 836 of the Book of Common Prayer: “We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.” The prayer doesn’t stop there, it goes on to say: “We thank you for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.”

Yes, there will be successes and failures, joys and disappointments. But we do not travel alone. God is in the midst of us. That’s what Jesus promised his disciples on the mountain in Galilee: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” – Matthew 28:20

Let’s not forget his name is Emmanuel – God with us. My God and your God. Amy’s God and Betty Stuart’s God. The one who is Alpha and Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty, who spoke these words to Joshua and who speaks these words to us: “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for I am with you wherever you go.”

And so, brothers and sisters, after we have done our grieving, after we have done our preparation, let us all, each and every one of us, cross over into the new thing God is preparing for St. Anne’s.

Amen.

Delivered by the Rev. M. Dion Thompson on February 4, 2018