Last week, we commemorated the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation movement. We recognized that the foundations that many of the Reformists have laid over 500 years serve as the seeds of on-going reformation of our faith. As Presbyterians, we believe that our faith is not only “*reformed but always reforming, according to the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”* Everyday day we live, we take part of this marathon by faith and not by sight,[[1]](#footnote-1) while pursuing the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Our text this morning on this marathon Sunday also invited us to go on this long journey with the Israelites in the wilderness – a journey that began nearly 500 years ago when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. Even though they were liberated, thanks to a prophet named Moses, they continued to meander out in the no-man’s land for the next 40 years. We got to give them credit for their persistence and perseverance...that’s almost ½ of our life time, if not more. 40 years is a very long time…but not too long in God’s timing. Sooner or later, their patience would wear thin. They would begin to question God’s leadership and divine providence. They had already done so with Moses’ leadership. They complained that they would rather go back to be slaves in Egypt, than to die in the desert of hunger and thirst. Where is the land that they were promised? Where are the “milk and honey”? All they got were manna and quails. How much longer must we travel and suffer?

There was still a long way to go with many more challenges ahead before they would reach their Promised Land. There were still many rivers and valleys that they must cross and mountains to climb. They must also conquer land that was currently occupied by people who were much stronger and bigger physically than they were. Do you still think this was a good idea? But the people were not discouraged. They were determined to see God’s promise delivered. They knew that God was on their side. They believed that they would see God’s plan come through in accordance to God’s time.

40 years might seem like a long-long time, but it’s just a blip on God’s radar. It turns out there was a purpose for those years of waiting as a season of spiritual purging (or a time of preparation). Only those who were born out in the wilderness would be allowed to enter into the Promised Land…not even Moses himself. He could only see it from a distance but never set his feet on it. This was all part of God’s timing and providence, and also a test of their obedience and faithfulness. With a new sense of liberation and freedom, the Israelites also had to re-learn what it means to be a community, not only with one another but also with God.

Our text this morning leads us to yet another critical milestone of this **epic marathon journey of liberation, courage and faith**. When the Israelites came upon the edge of the Jordan River, fear set in as they came to another point of no return. *Great, where are we going to go now? Turning back is not an option, we might as well just die right here.* There goes the whining and complaining once again. But they had nowhere else to go but to keep going forward! Although not as deep and not as wide as the Red Sea, the Jordan still represented a physical and psychological barrier…yet another challenge that needs to overcome.

According to some historians, much of the Jordan River was probably no more than 100' wide and 3-10' deep during the normal non-flooding season. But during the flooding season, the Jordan could be as wide as 600' wide and 150' deep. We’re not quite sure what season it was when the Israelites crossed, nevertheless, those Israelites were determined to cross the river no matter what, knowing that the land that God has promised, was just a “stone-throw” away. They have come this far, and they were not going back now. They were committed to go all the way.

Crossing the Jordan may seem melodramatic compared to the crossing of the Red Sea, it did however serve as yet another testament of faith between the people of Israel and Yehweh their God. Time after time, obstacles after obstacles, challenges after challenges, God demonstrated that He would remain sovereign and faithful to the people. God who would never abandon them.

Traveling along with the Israelites was the Ark of the Covenant, which housed the tablets of the Ten Commandment. There was also the staff of Moses and Aaron (representing the former generation) and pieces of manna, which signified God’s presence leading them through each step of their journey.

The logistic of carry the Ark across the river was no easy task. It had to be lifted high above the water by a member from each of the tribe.[[2]](#footnote-2)  The Ark offered the visible presence and God’s reminder and assurance that***“Wherever the people are, God will always be with them and will go ahead of them.”***

With the ark leading the way, one by one the people crossed the Jordan on dry ground, while the water miraculously ceased to flow from upstream. The ark served as an anchor of hope and a testament of faith of God’s provision and covenant that was established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and now with Moses and for the generations to come.

You notice that when faced with new challenges, the Israelites did not jump into action right away. They consulted God first and then planned out strategically among themselves of how best they would proceed. **As the new chosen leader of Israel, Joshua gathered all the people and sought God’s wisdom by listening to the Words of the LORD and praying to God for discernment and deliverance**.[[3]](#footnote-3) Instead of trusting in their own knowledge or judgement, they invoked God to lead them throughout this process trusting that God would perform yet another miracle amongst them, as He had always come to deliver time after time.

What about us? How often might we, as a church, find ourselves in similar situations like that of the Israelites, standing at the edge of the river, uncertain about our future and what is at stake? Like the Israelites, turning back to our past may not be a viable option…so we must keep going forward even through the uncertainty of our future. We must lean upon God’s ability and strength in order to accomplish what may seem as impossible. As scripture reminds us that *“we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

In light of the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, many biblical scholars believe that we are presently standing at a critical junction of our faith history. The Reformists led us to a new uncharted territory 500 years ago. A new movement erupted that led to the rekindling of our relationship with God and a revival of our faith. The people re-examined their lives and the true meaning of salvation. They repented and turned from their sins of idolatry of self-gratification and self-glorification by reclaiming their faith and relationship in God.

It seems as though we are going in the opposite direction. People are drifting further and further away from God, as our secular lives overtake and overshadow our spiritual lives. We sure have come a long way over the past 500 years…yet with fear and trepidation we ask ourselves, what will the next 500 years be like? Are we doing our parts, as reformist of our time, to plant the seeds of the future for the generations to come?

This church has also served as a beacon of faithful ministry over the past 117 years. None of us were there when it first chartered but all of us have been brought here by the grace of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit to respond to God’s calling to carry on the legacy of faith. God has called upon YOU, as women and men of faith to step up and accept new responsibilities to continue to run this race together…just as Moses and Aaron had passed on the torch to Joshua and Caleb (the new generation) to eventually lead them into the Promised Land.

**No matter how wide or how deep our “Jordan River” may be, we have the full confidence knowing that the God of our Covenant will always go before us. God will lead us, guide us, and protect us from all unforeseen challenges ahead.**

This is an exciting time but also a challenging time to be engaged in God’s ministry here on earth. It calls upon a great deal of imagination, faithfulness, courage and even making sacrifice and taking risks. Just yesterday, a few of us went to the Presbytery’s Resource Day. We learned about what other churches are doing radically different from what they are traditionally charged to do, when it comes to ministry. We heard the story of Rutger Presbyterian Church and their effort in hosting and supporting a refugee family from Syria…this was actually on the news when the Travel Ban from many Muslim of these countries came into effect. Some of us went to another workshop about reaching out to the next generation through inter-generational worship. How we can make our worship inclusive and welcoming for all people….not just among those who are in the “inner-circle”? These are just a couple of examples of radical but yet forward-thinking responses to the new challenges in ministry ahead of us, as we march “Beyond the Jordan”.

**The** “**Crossing the Jordan” event was a metaphoric rite of passage for the people of God of letting go of the past and fixing their eyes on the future.** In the same way, God has challenged each of us in this room today to step up our faith to be the leaders of tomorrow with boldness and conviction, as did many of the Reformists about 500 years ago. As Jesus said, *“even with the faith of a mustard seed, a mountain may be moved. Nothing will be impossible for you.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* What “Jordan River” is God asking us to cross today? How have we responded to God’s calling to be God’s servants of others?

In a moment, we will once again come before the LORD’s table, to rededicate our commitment as servants of God’s ministry and of God’s people. As Jesus taught ***“the greatest among you will be my servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”[[6]](#footnote-6)***

Christ came amongst us to serve and not to be served. **We are All Saints in God’s sight and ministers of God’s people**, abiding faithfully in God’s teaching and in God’s love. God has assured us that together we shall one day reach the “Promised Land” beyond the Jordan. Thanks be to God. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *II Corinthians 5:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Joshua 3:12* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Joshua 3:9* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Philippians 4:13* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Matthew 17:20* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Matthew 23:11-12* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)