

God goes ahead of us

Sermon on first Sunday after Epiphany Joshua 3, 5-11 and 17



[3](#) giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. [4](#) Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.” [5](#) Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.” [6](#) Joshua said to the priests, “Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.” So they took it up and went ahead of them. [7](#) And the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. [8](#) Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” [9](#) Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God. [10](#) This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out

before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. [11](#) See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you.

[17](#) The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

Caleb was one of the lucky Israelites who managed to reach the Jordan. For 40 years, the people of Israel had experienced nothing but desert. Forty years of drought, hunger, thirst... and now they had finally arrived. Caleb was the only one who had made it, together with Joshua. All the others who had fled Egypt at that time had died in the meantime. Caleb was now an old man. But that was not the biggest problem. The biggest problem was the Jordan River, which had burst over all its banks during the rainy season. It was clear to Caleb that this river could not be crossed. Not even with the most skilled bridge builder. The situation was completely hopeless. And Caleb thought... „And if we cross the river, it will only be half the mile. Because on the other side of the river there were countless strong peoples who were not at all willing to accept the Israelites with open arms.“ While Caleb was still deep in thought, the voice of his friend Joshua suddenly rang out. And what Caleb heard, was truly unbelievable. Joshua had called all the priests together and ordered them to carry the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments to the Jordan. Exactly as if they were going to a prayer service. "What is this all about?" thought Caleb. To cross the river, you need strong men or at least bridge builders. And on the other side, you need the best warriors. What do the priests know about all these things? They can't do anything against the strong waters. But Caleb had already experienced a lot during his wanderings in the desert. When he saw the strong peoples on the other side of the river, he was the one who encouraged the people not to give up courage, because God would clear a way. So he thought to himself. "I better look at this from afar and see what's going to happen next?" And

then Joshua continued speaking. The people should follow exactly in the footsteps of the priests. Exactly as if they were solemnly declaring that they were following this God of the 10 Commandments and doing exactly what this God demands in the 10 commandments. The procession inspired Caleb. He thought to himself, "This is something special!" and he could see how other members of his family were also inspired. Very quietly he began to sing a song about God's salvation and heard others singing along. And then he saw it happen. The moment the priests reached the water, the strong waters of the Jordan stopped like a wall. And the river stopped exactly where the priests were and became completely dry. The priests continued on. The people followed them. A people in the footsteps of the 10 Commandments. A people following God. Caleb would experience much more in the promised land. Even when he was 85 years old, it was said that he was still vigorously serving the one God who had given the 10 Commandments. Caleb always held firmly in his heart that God goes ahead. He did it when he led the Israelites through the Red Sea, and he did it again when he led the Israelites through the Jordan, and he did it again countless times after that. God is a God who goes ahead of us- This idea became a part of Caleb's life.

The story I have made up above from Caleb's perspective is intended to show us how special the Israelites' crossing of the river Jordan was. In fact, you could say that the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea on the one hand and the crossing of the Jordan on the other hand form a kind of bracket that encloses the time of their wanderings in the desert. This time of wandering in the desert is described in the Bible as a phase of testing for the Israelites. During this time they also received the Ten Commandments, which not only formed the central role of their faith, but are the destiny of all people on earth. The crossing of the Jordan and especially the Israelites' experience and belief that God went ahead was an important lesson for them. They should know that in all dangers and in all impossible challenges, God goes ahead of them. God would not only lead through the impossible waters, but would also go ahead in all other impassable and impossible situations. Today, this term "crossing the Jordan" has a rather negative meaning. This is usually said when you notice that a person is terminally ill and dying. For most people, the term "crossing the Jordan" means something negative or frightening. But we must not forget that it was the same for Joshua, Caleb and the Israelites. The water and the dangerous peoples that stood before them represented an impossible situation. It was clear to everyone that their human capabilities had reached the end of their strength and possibilities. And so the term "crossing the Jordan" is correctly understood if we mean that human strength is at an end here. The fact that Joshua uses the priests and the Ark of the Covenant shows that it is not people at work here, but God. The Israelites should learn that they cannot rely on their own strength, but on God. God, who always goes ahead, no matter how bad the situation may be. The Israelites had to wander in the desert for 40 years. Perhaps some people had forgotten during that time that God is actually always there. Maybe some even thought that the whole story of the promised land was a mistake and that their fathers had simply been deceived. But then on the day they crossed the Jordan with the priests, everything became clear. It was clear that God keeps his promises and it became clear that God always goes ahead. No matter how bad the situation may be.

The situation of the Israelites before the dangerous river is a very moving situation that we can all relate to in one way or another. We know that the Israelites had not yet reached their goal after this river crossing. Many more challenges lay ahead of them. They fell away from their faith in God countless other times. Ultimately, they would lose the promised land again. So the final crossing of the Jordan was not yet reached. Much more was to happen. And yet the story moves us and can help us to see God's intervention in our lives in many situations. For some of us, baptism itself is such a step into the unknown. As a matter of fact, baptism means that you

could be executed in Iran or Afghanistan. Many people ask themselves: "And what if all this about baptism is not true? What if baptism is just an invention of the church?" But we know that baptism is not an invention of humans, but God's promise that we will go to heaven. And that we can rely on God just as the Israelites did on God's presence through the Ark of the Covenant. Each of us can possibly report on our own experience of the Ark of the Covenant. It can happen that a doctor diagnoses a very serious and dangerous illness. The illness suddenly thwarts all plans and all future projects. And suddenly the illness is in front of you, just like the waters of the Jordan, preventing you from taking even a single step forward. In this situation too, we can know that God is ahead of us. The Israelites' 40-year journey through the desert is surrounded by the two rescue experiences where God walked through the water with the Israelites. It is no coincidence that Jesus was baptized in these very waters of the Jordan before he began his public ministry. It is also no coincidence that Jesus immediately afterwards fasted for 40 days in the desert and was tempted by Satan. For just as the priests in the Old Covenant went ahead with the 10 Commandments, so Jesus goes ahead of us in the New Testament. He went ahead of us in baptism and shows us that the Old Adam is to be drowned.

Jesus went into the depths a second time. And that was when he went into the depths of hell to defeat Satan. In this way, Jesus shows us that he goes ahead us, just as he did with the people of Israel. Death is an insurmountable obstacle for all of us. And yet we know that Jesus goes before us even at this utter desperation and clears the way for us. Caleb was an old man when he arrived in the promised land. And yet it is said of him that he remained faithful to God forever. So it can be that experiences of salvation from the past shape an entire life. We can keep these experiences in our hearts and keep thinking about them. And that is why we are here today, to hear God's word of salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ and to be able to share in his salvation. A salvation that he created for us in advance. Amen.