

Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it." Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you." 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.

In the name of our triune God, who is with us as we travel from one year into the next, dear friends,

If you were to explain to someone why New Year's Eve is special, what would you say? At first you might think of the national celebration that rolls across the country's time zones, the countdown and the dropping of the ball in Times Square, New York, the parties, or a reason to enjoy a glass of champagne.

But if you think a little more, you'd probably come up with the reason behind why we do all those things. For many people, it is a time to pause and reflect on the passing year—with all its rollercoaster-like ups and downs—and to look forward to what lies ahead of us—the great unknown. Every year on New Year's Eve—no matter what kind of celebrating we do (or if we do none at all)—we close the book on the past year and start writing another one with the New Year. But on New Year's Eve, *Christians* pause for something a bit more meaningful: to view these things in relation to God's goodness and his promises. Tonight we do that by thinking about the Word of God found in Joshua 3.

I'd like to give you just a little of the historical background of these words in case they are unfamiliar or if it has been a while since you've read them. It's important for us to realize what was going on with God's people at this point in history.

If we were to turn the pages of our Bibles back to chapter one of Joshua, we would find that the Lord had prepared his leader, Joshua, for the journey the Israelites were about to make into the Promised Land. Joshua then prepared the people. They folded up their tents and packed up their possessions and collected their flocks and herds and disassembled the tabernacle and prepared the Ark of the Covenant. Then they traveled the next few miles down to the bank of the Jordan River, which they would have to cross to get the land the Lord would give them. But when they got to the river bank, they camped for three more days. Why the delay? The concerns were not physical ones; they were packed and ready to go and the journey they had just made to get there was only a couple short miles. That would not call for a three day rest. So why the delay?

The reason was a spiritual one. The Lord was about to perform a great miracle, as great in power and importance as the crossing of the Red Sea. The Lord wanted his people ready for what was about to happen. And as they waited, they stared at the waters of the Jordan, swollen to its wider banks here in the spring of the year. That water presented a problem for them; they couldn't possibly cross it. And yet, maybe some recalled what God had done with the Red Sea as the Egyptians chased after God's people. Those people were at an interesting point in time, thinking perhaps of both blessings from the Lord in the past and the challenges that were ahead of them.

And therein lies the reason you and I examine this bit of history tonight. We too are forced to stop and think of the challenges and also remember the goodness of God. We stand at the brink of 2016 much like the Israelites stood at the brink of the Jordan River, wondering how they would cross over and what awaited them when they did. And so I urge you tonight to do what those people of God did:

FOLLOW THE LORD INTO NEW TERRITORY Be assured that

- 1. HE WILL GUIDE YOU** and that
- 2. HE WILL DO AMAZING THINGS**

The Lord has always guided his people, sometimes in spectacular ways. We may recall how He led them safely through the Red Sea on dry ground, or how he led the Israelites in the wilderness by a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud during the day. And now His people were to follow the Ark of the Covenant that would go ahead of them. Listen again: **When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it.**

Remember the Ark of the Covenant? It was that wooden chest—very close in size to our communion table here—overlaid with gold inside and out. On the cover were two golden cherubim, angels, whose wings spread to overshadow the cover. Inside the ark were the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments on them, a golden jar with some manna in it from their wandering in the desert, and Aaron's staff. The priests carried the ark with four poles inserted in four golden rings on the sides.

This Ark of the Covenant was a constant reminder of the presence of God. And with it, God was leading his people into NEW TERRITORY. When the Israelites eyes were focused on this visual reminder of the Lord's presence among them, their *hearts* would lean on him also.

An explanation was even given to the people that day as to why they should follow the Ark, and thus God: **Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.** Is the instruction these people of God received much different than what you and I receive from him? Aren't we also supposed to keep our focus on God as we journey through life? Of course we are. And the reason remains the same: **Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.** What wise counsel that is for us as we get ready to cross over into a new year! Those people knew God was there because of the Ark of the Covenant. We know God is here because of the presence of his Word. If we are intently fixed on God's Word, we, too, will know which way to go. As we enter 2016, we don't know exactly what is ahead of us. We have never been this way before.

Think back over the last year for a moment. How many situations confronted us that we were not expecting? How did we handle them? How many things confronted us that we *were* expecting? And again, how did we handle them? Were we sometimes a little fearful, worried? Did we occasionally not deal with things in a way that pleased God? Did we ever call God's wisdom into question? His love? Did we tackle life's challenges without relying on him, but heavily leaning on our own wisdom and plan?

I'm going to assume that you—like me—were not perfect over the span of 2015. A perfect trust in God would not have sinned in those ways. I hate to remind you, but life's ups and downs will continue in this new year—and you will still have that sinful nature giving you bad advice.

Here are some things to think about:

- For those with families—where will you take your direction from when it comes to managing your family?
- What will you do when someone you love dies this year?
- What will you do, those of you who will struggle with relationship problems in dating or marriage or family or school or work?
- What will you do when you are asked to serve your Lord with your gifts?
- What will you do when that particular temptation comes along—that one that appeals to you even more than others?

Where will your direction come from? On what will your attention be focused? Will you allow your sinful nature take over? When confronted with your weakness, will you shrug it off and say, “*Yeah, but...?*” Will you repeat the sinful failures of the last year?

There is another way. Your Savior God would have you shift your focus to him. Look to the Lord for guidance. And if you don't feel that God can and will guide you, then you are mistaken. Let me share a couple things God's Word says about prayer and using your Bible:

James 1:5 says to pray, asking for direction: **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.**

You could pray like David did in Psalm 143:10: **Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground.**

But if you are looking for God to speak to you and tell you how to handle things, that happens through listening to him speak through his holy Word:

This is Isaiah 48:17-18: **Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. "If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.**

And Psalm 119:5: **Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.**

God *promises* to GUIDE YOU as you look to him. And he has never fallen through on a promise. We are reminded that he kept His greatest promise ever—the promise to send a Savior. Jesus came and shed his blood and died so that you and I are forgiven for every lack of focus on our parts, every doubt about God's love or help or direction or purpose for our lives. Every sin was paid for on the cross. God has forgiven us and made us his holy people. So don't doubt and don't worry, simply FOLLOW THE LORD INTO THE NEW TERRITORY OF 2016 and look to him to GUIDE YOU.

Besides the precious promise that God will guide us, we have the assurance that HE WILL DO AMAZING THINGS in the coming year.

As the leader of God's people, Joshua had the responsibility of getting the people ready. This is what Joshua told them: **Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you. Set yourselves apart, prepare yourselves!** God has put me in a position similar to that of Joshua's and so I'll simply repeat those words to you on this New Year's Eve: **Consecrate yourselves, for (starting) tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.** Obviously, I did not receive a special revelation from God. But I, like you, have seen God work before and I know what he promises in his Word.

I can tell you for a fact that...**the LORD will do amazing things among you.** I know that during this next year, you and I will witness miracles. We will be privileged to watch as God transforms a guilty sinner into an angelic child of His through the power of Baptism. An AMAZING THING! You and I will stand on the sidelines as God does the work of taking minds and hearts who hate him or don't know much about him and turning them around to love him as the Holy Spirit works through instruction in His Word. An AMAZING THING! Some of you witnessed or even experienced those things this last year. We will see them again in 2016. We will also receive AMAZING THINGS from God as with repentant hearts we approach his Table and receive strengthening of faith and forgiveness of sins in the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. And realize that tonight as we do that, it will be one of the final things we do at the end of 2015. What an AMAZING blessing that is!

Those Israelites would experience AMAZING THINGS as the LORD would stop the Jordan River so they could cross it, and as God would lead them to the walls of Jericho and see it fall in spectacular fashion. AMAZING THINGS were in store for them. But the power and love and blessing of our God will be no less amazing in the things God has in store for us, his people today. We've already mentioned some of the things we know God will do. Who knows what else God has in store for our congregation or the individuals in these pews!

I don't know about you, but I find it exciting to be standing at our Jordan River, New Year's Eve, waiting to see what God will do with us and for us this coming year! I hope that you can share that feeling, that whatever God has in mind, that's okay with us. Whether those things initially seem good to us or bad, we'll know that God's will is done and that in love, he will work through them for our good and for the good of his church.

Consecrate yourselves, Joshua said to God's people before they crossed over. I remind you to do the same. Having been blessed by God in the past and forgiven through Jesus for our sins, we look to God's Word to GUIDE US in the new year and trusts him to do AMAZING THINGS. We will do what those Israelites under Joshua's leadership did, simply FOLLOW THE LORD INTO NEW TERRITORY, a new year, trusting completely in Him who loved us enough to save us. May that wholehearted trust in God find its way into our New Year's resolutions this year—a rededication to God as we go together, FOLLOWING THE LORD INTO NEW TERRITORY. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.