

I. Intro: What a difference a year makes! (or does it?)

A. So often we look back at our lives and see the years pass by and not much changes

1. Another year, another Michiana Relief Sale. ... Yes, the kids are a little taller, but most households here at Waterford are pretty stable.

2. How stable are we?

a) As an indicator of the degree of stability we tend to have in our personal lives, I'll make five statements about things that are constant in your life and ask you to raise your hand if any one of them is true

b) If you're not regularly attending Waterford you can still do this.

(1) Listen if at least one of these statements true:

(a) You're still attending the same church as you were last year at this time

(b) You're still living with the same people

(c) You're still living in the same place

(d) You're still working at the same job

(e) (Or if a student) You're still at the same school as last year

(2) How many had at least one of these statements being true? (hands raised) [Just about everybody has a little stability in their life]

c) For how many of you were all of the statements true, (meaning none of those five things are different from a year ago)? [We have some very stable households here ...]

3. So we might conclude that for most of us, not much has changed in a year ... Life has gone on at home pretty much the same

B. But what about our congregation?

1. We're still in the same location, doing mostly the same ministry activities we did a year ago. ...

a) the where" and the "what" and the "why" of our visible church have hardly changed in the past year

b) But what a difference a year makes!

(1) There's been a very big change in the "who": we have a very different pastoral team

(2) Right now, due to a sabbatical, we have only one active pastor who was pastoring here a year ago (yours truly)

2. So when we dwelt with Joshua chapters 3 and 4 less than a year ago, we as a congregation were very much in transition in leadership

a) We knew who our pastoral leaders were going to be, but two of them had not started working here yet.

b) And in our church's directional statement, we named our calling to build on our present strengths and allow Waterford to continue to grow.

c) But we didn't know the places this journey would take us as we adjusted to a new pastoral team.

d) What a difference a year makes! So our context is different but the basic contours of the biblical story remain the same

II. Two full chapters is a lot to digest, so let me just summarize this story in a few phrases

A. You might be able to remember it if I give you the **5 Cs of Joshua leading the people into the land of Canaan**

1. First the Israelites **came** through the wilderness. They arrived after 40 long years of wandering

2. Then they **camped** while awaiting God's command. They did nothing but wait there three days before they got any clue what to do next

3. Finally, they **crossed** over the Jordan following behind the Ark of the Covenant

a) When the very presence of God (represented in the ark) went in front of them, it caused the upstream waters to stop and allowed the multitude of Israelites to cross on dry ground, as long as the priests stayed in the riverbed with the ark.

b) This was the miracle, the deliverance they sought.

4. But that wasn't the end of this story. God knew how quickly his people would forget what he'd done. He knew that they would need some kind of tangible reminder of this great day.

a) So the Israelites **constructed** a stone memorial to help them remember this day of deliverance.

b) For the sake of all 12 tribes, they built a shrine out of 12 stones taken from the middle of the riverbed.

5. And then every year after this miracle, they **commemorated** this event with their children. The stone shrine caused the children to ask what it meant, and it gave everyone a chance to remember and tell the story of God's salvation once again.

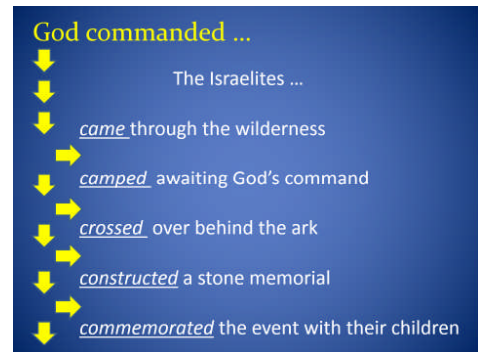
B. But the 5 Cs of this story are inadequate, because these 5 Cs are all verbs telling us what the Israelites did.

1. You might remember that I preached that this really isn't Israel's story at all. It's God's story because God is the one who saves, and God is the main actor

2. So actually there is a sixth C: God **commanded**

a) At every stage of the story, God commands or instructs something, and then God's people take action

b) What the people of God do here is only in response to what God first instructs them to do ... God commands and goes first, **then** the people act



3. That point was something we stressed in this text last year

III. It reminds me of a few other things we stressed:

A. As I hinted at the beginning, **changes and transitions are inevitable**, even when from one year to another things might not change much

1. One of the highlights of a sermon that Sheldon Swartz preached was when he said, "The surest way to kill the life in something is to try to make it stay the same."

2. We all recognize change is going to come, and sometimes we welcome it

3. But more often we drag our heels, or we dig in our heels

B. Another thing we stressed was learning from the image of the hermit crab, drawing from a children's book

1. The message here was that when a church outgrows its "house", which may not just be the physical building, then the old "house" no longer fits as well

2. This became more true in the past three years for us at Waterford

a) Our current worship space was feeling crowded. We could no longer comfortably fit in this "shell," **unless** we got a little more creative about how we could fit in the shell



b) So then we tried some new ways that we could still keep growing while staying in the same worship “shell”

(1) We now have two nearly identical worship services

(2) We replaced most of the pews with chairs, which increased our seating capacity by about 75 people

(3) And we came up with a worship and space plan for incrementally dealing with growth God may give us in the future

IV. When we stayed with this text, we called the series “The sweep of the river”

A. For centuries “crossing the Jordan” has been a Christian metaphor for a transition into some desired “promised land”

1. Death is probably the most common metaphor used for the Jordan River, but it may mean almost any significant “crossing point” that keeps us from arriving where we believe God is leading us

2. In the Sweep of the River series, and in our church board meetings, crossing the Jordan has been a metaphor for our church fully thinking and acting like the large congregation that we basically are, rather than behaving like an overgrown midsize church

3. So where are we now in this story?

a) Those of you familiar with our congregation in the past few years should probably answer that question for yourself ...

(1) whether you think we’re still camped on the near shore ... or just entering the riverbed ...

(2) or in the middle of the process of crossing ... or having just arrived on the other side

b) Myself, I think we’re still crossing over and haven’t yet “arrived,” but we’re more than halfway to the other side

B. So when we think about Waterford Mennonite Church crossing this river into the land of being a large Mennonite congregation, **I want to challenge us in two ways of thinking:**

1. First, if you recall the image of the hermit crab outgrowing his shell, I wonder, ***Are there some mid-sized congregation “shells” that have served us well in the past but might hinder our growth?***

a) Are there some things we routinely do at Waterford that do not usually characterize churches our size and larger? Yes, there might be, and we would be challenged to let go of these sacred cows. I’m thinking of ...

(1) All-congregation fellowship meals, which is really something that small- and medium-sized churches do

(2) Open-microphone sharing of prayer concerns in worship ... you will not find many churches of 300 or 400 in worship who do this anymore because not everyone knows everyone personally, and people find their prayer support in intimate smaller groups

(3) A “Getting to Know you” night when we invite new attenders at Waterford to vulnerably stand before 80 or 100 new people to introduce themselves, but we don’t expect everyone present to go introduce themselves to the newcomers

b) Now let me be clear, none of these things I just named are bad practices, and I myself have enjoyed each of them ...

(1) But they also lead us to keep thinking like a smaller church,

(2) and they imply that we should expect to personally know everyone at church, and that we should have everyone personally support and pray for us

(3) It is possible to find meaningful relationships and a genuine spiritual community in a large church without personally knowing everyone in the congregation

c) The question is “Can we envision that there might be other ways to be a caring and Mennonite large congregation than the ways we’ve always done church?”

2. Here’s one more provocative insight that I will put before us from Joshua chapter 4 ... *(if you remember me preaching about this last year, forgive me, but I think the biblical principle here is important)*

a) When we read Joshua chapter 4, most of us gloss right over vv. 12 and 13 where several of the Israelite tribes are mentioned

(1) The naming of those tribes didn’t mean anything to me at first, until I read further on in book of Joshua, and I saw a map of the territories allotted to all the tribes

(2) Chapters 12 and 13 describe where each tribe’s allotted territory was ... notice that Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh have their territory on the EAST side of the Jordan River



(a) This was land that the Israelites had already conquered for Reuben, Gad and Manasseh

(b) So their long-term home was on the east side of the river ... *not* in the land of Canaan.

(3) Yet the Bible tells us that the warriors of these 2½ tribes were called to enter the Promised Land anyway, even though they would later be crossing right back to return to their assigned lands!

b) How interesting that all of the Israelites supported the Jordan River crossing, even though not all would stay in the Promised Land!

(1) Apparently the rightful place for some of them was to go back across the Jordan after helping the majority to see their own Promised Land

(2) **They didn't all have to end up at the same place in order to be God's people** ... let us ponder that for a while ... (*repeat*)

c) Could that be true of God's people in the church today when we face differences of opinion about our direction?

(1) I believe a significant lesson from the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River is that, even when God is leading us, *we don't all have to think alike, and we don't all have to end up at the same place*

(2) As we discern ways to use our facilities while allowing for God to give us growth, could those with a different preferred position about worship styles or worship times still help the others “cross over,” before they may eventually themselves cross back?

(3) Over the centuries, fractures and church splits have littered church history with the results of rigid ways of thinking, where it became “my way or the highway”

(4) Could the example of “crossing back” from Joshua 4 possibly mean living as a loyal but vocal minority, rather than dropping out entirely when things don't go our way?

V. Conclusion

A. In your personal faith, there may be a “Jordan River” that you long to cross in order to reach the land God has promised you

B. Today I invite us to especially think in congregational terms:

1. I invite us not to stay camped on the familiar shore of a midsize church that prefers not to accept growth from God if the other side of the river looks too scary.

2. God’s presence goes before us and beckons us forward, even if “we have not passed this way before”

3. Traditionalists who want to preserve the status quo like to say, “The more things change, the more they stay the same”

a) As I look around at what God wants to do in our world, challenging my own complacency, I believe that the saying needs to be flipped on its head: “The more things stay the same, the more they keep changing.”

b) Thanks be to the Eternal One, the One who also said, “behold I’m making all things new”!

C. God’s word comes to us in many forms, sometimes through one voice or many voices. We invite you to add your voice for the benefit of the gathered community.