

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 18, 2012, Pentecost 25, dedicated to Rupert “Twink” Starr our 2012 Lay Leader for his leadership in our church, community and country and to Tyler Sitler Ahrens, our family’s dog of 16 years who has been a friend and a companion on life’s journey to my children and my wife, and always to the glory of God!*

**“Crossing Over”**  
**Deuteronomy 8:1-3, 7-10, 17-20;**  
**Matthew 6:25-33**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and salvation. Amen.

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The Delaware River, which flows between New Jersey and Pennsylvania, is neither wide nor particularly deep. As it flows near Trenton, New Jersey, there are places where you can skip stones across the Delaware. As a child growing up near Trenton and the Delaware River, I remember skipping stones there. I was always struck by this fact, especially when introduced to the famous painting of General George Washington, standing up in a boat, while crossing the Delaware and leading his troops in a surprise attack of the British on Christmas Eve 1778.

Besides the obvious danger of standing in a boat while moving across ice flowing currents, Washington’s crossing the Delaware reminds us that crossing over a body of water in the movement from oppression to freedom is a powerful act. It is heroic. It is huge.

Down on the southern banks of the Ohio River, tens of thousands of African American slaves through a hundred years or

more crossed the often wide and flowing Ohio to the northern banks where freedom was waiting in the free state of Ohio. It was a crossing of courage and determination. Even today, crossing the Rio Grand River from Mexico to the United States is a daunting task Central American men, women and children who seek new life and new hope in North America in our time.

We come from a people who crossed over as well. In the story of the “Separationists” (as they were called) thrown out of England in the 1580s and accepted into Holland, the people we later called Pilgrims came to America with a “crossing over” story filled with faith and trust. These “pilgrim” people were the forerunners of Congregational Christians. When they left Leyden, Holland, in 1620, Pastor John Robinson stood on the docks delivering what could have been his very last sermon.

Taking one look at the Mayflower, you wondered how far across the Atlantic these pilgrims would progress. Pastor Robinson’s little band of men, women, and children were brave and adventurous Christians. Like the Israelites before them, they were searching for the land of promise. They needed a new start in a wholly new holy land. Pastor Robinson had been their pastor for 16 years when he enjoined them to follow him no further than he would follow Christ Jesus. “If they found a better way to Christ,” he said, “and then go that way.” But, Robinson concluded, “in all things, trust in God and allow Jesus Christ to guide your hearts, your minds and your feet.”

“Crossing over” from slavery to freedom; moving from wandering to promise is always a journey of trust. Crossing the Jordan River was no different. In Deuteronomy 8, we encounter God’s people at a crossing point. For 40 years, they have moved through the Sinai Desert – a mountainous and barren desert land. While it took 10 miraculous plagues to get them free of Egyptian slavery, coupled with 10 commandments of God’s law to free them from themselves, it has taken 40 years of wandering to get Egypt out of the people. Through the power of God’s guiding hand, they have come to the edge of promise.

For 14,600 days the people of God have lived in a land full of scorpions and serpents. They have had nothing to eat but manna from heaven. Yes, manna – which from the Hebrew literally translates **“What is this?”** - has been their food on the journey.

To the Bedouins who live in the Sinai, manna is no mystery. They can tell you what manna is. They gather yet today and bake it into bread. They still call it manna. The flakes come from plant lice that feed on the local tamarisk trees. Because the sap is poor in nitrogen, the bugs have to eat a lot of it in order to live. They excrete the extra in a yellowish-white flake or ball of juice from the tree that is rich in carbohydrates and sugars. It decays quickly and attracts ants so a daily portion is the most anyone can gather (*Bread of Angels*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1997, p.9).

This “Bread of Angels” (as some call it – probably some other than the Israelites) has been eaten however they have been able to eat it. They have had raw manna, cooked manna, boiled manna, baked manna, ground manna. Manna has been there when they have needed it – their daily bread! They have been humbled and at times humiliated – but they have been fed.

Now, at the crossing over point, they are more than ready to enter a land flowing with milk and honey. Throughout their 40 year sojourn, they have learned that men and women cannot live by bread alone – but by every word that flows from the mouth of God. As they stand on the banks of the Jordan River – with the Promised Land ahead of them and the desert behind them – God’s people are called to trust one more time. This time they must trust that the waters will open, that the river will provide safe passage that freedom is finally and ultimately at hand. With faith and trust in God as their guiding light, the Israelites cross over again. They make it and the struggle of their journey continues even to this present day – as their land of promise has become a land ravaged by the presence of war and conflict.

“Crossing over” is something all of us have faced in one way or another. We have had to face our fears, our anxieties, our dreads,

and even death itself. At times we have stood on the banks of eternal life as our beloved ones crossed over to eternity. With a little bit of faith, with a little bit of trust, we have gotten ourselves to the edge of promise. But, in order to cross over, we need more than a little bit of faith and trust. We need God.

Some of us have faced amazing odds in our life. When you were a prisoner of war in World War II, Twink, didn't faith and trust in God have some small part in delivering you to freedom? When some of you have faced relocation, dislocation, pain and suffering, or perhaps the trauma of abuse and neglect – what part did trust and faith in God play in your crossing over to freedom and hope?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus found himself with disciples who had a small amount of faith. As we discover, it is not that they had NO faith, but their little bit wasn't enough. Their small faith caused them to be highly anxious. They were worried all the time. They were worried about what they would eat, what they would drink, and what they would wear. They had food, fluid and fashion anxieties – all wrapped up in one!

Jesus told them not to worry. He told them they would be okay for if God takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, God is going to take care of us. Jesus teaches them to “seek first” God's kingdom, God's way, God's will – and everything else will take care of itself. Trust, faith, and now obedience to God. It seems simple and clear. Do you believe that?

Do you have trust in God to help you cross over whatever you are facing? Whether the river facing you is deep and broad, or shallow and narrow – trust God. Whether the problems facing you seem huge and overwhelming – causing you to gasp for breath and seek a new way – trust God! Whether you need manna (**“What is this?”**) from heaven or a prayer for the journey - trust God. All will be well and all will go well. You will cross over – with help from our God. Amen.

