

Joshua 3:1-4

The children of Israel are standing on the border of the promised land. Forty years have passed since they left the land of Egypt. They have experienced many a trial and tribulation, but also countless blessings. All the older people have died in the wilderness, and also many of the young. Even Moses, their leader, has been buried on Mount Nebo. Joshua, the Hebrew name for Jesus has become their new leader. He has assembled the people on the eastern banks of the Jordan River, and they can clearly see the promised land on the other side. But the rushing Jordan stand in their way, and there are reports that many powerful enemies will fight to keep them out. So to strengthen their faith and hope, Joshua speaks the words of our lesson.

Friends, we are too are on a journey. We have reached the banks of the Jordan, the end of another year, and are ready to cross into another year, 2015. For many of us, there have been 40 plus years of wandering through the wilderness of this earth. Like the children of Israel we have experienced our share of trials and troubles, but also countless blessings and victories. What the future holds for us, we do not know. We see enemies before us. Enemies like cancer, strokes, heart attacks, car accidents, and other family crisis. So our new Joshua, Jesus Christ, also reminds us, "You have not gone this way before." So we pray on this new year's eve. "Guide Me Lord in the New Year!"

First of all, as we look to 2015, we need to rely on God's presence. To the Israelites, the ark symbolized the presence of God. In that ark were the following items: First, the two tablets of stone on which the ten commandments had been written by the hand of God himself. The ten commandments testified to our need for a Savior, and then they served as a blueprint for the Christian life. Second, a supernaturally preserved pot of manna, reminded them that God is one who can satisfy. Jesus said later, in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life." Thirdly, Aaron's budding rod, would remind the people that God is a miracle-working God. Nothing is impossible with him. **KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE ARK.** There was a space between the ark and people (v. 4). Why the space? God wanted the ark to be clearly visible to everyone. Had there been no space between the ark and the people, those who followed closely behind it would obscure the view of the others—only those in the first few ranks had been able to behold it.

That's what you and I must do if we're to make it victoriously through the unknown territory that lies before us in 2015. We need to keep our spiritual eyes on Jesus, just as those Israelites kept their physical eyes on the ark. And His presence can be seen in His Word and Sacraments. His word is still a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path. His sacraments are still our mercy seat, where we can go for pardon and forgiveness, comfort and strength. To follow any other path will only lead to destruction, just as surely as the Jews would have drowned if they had tried to cross the river in any other place. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Rely on God's presence in 2015.

As the Israelites were crossing the Jordan they were to keep their eye on the ark, and to keep looking forward. They were not to look behind. It is real easy to look at all the mistakes we have made in 2014 or in years before 2014, and carry the thoughts of those mistakes into the new year. Listen to what God does with our past mistakes. Isaiah 1:18 says, *Isaiah 1:18 "Come, let's talk this over, says the Lord. No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow."* There is no detergent in the world that can make that claim. He takes out those spots that cannot be removed even by Super All Powerful Dominant Cheer. "I can take the stain out," He says, "I want to clean your conscience. I want to clear your memory. I want to set you free from regrets so you can get on with the future." He says, "I don't want to rub it in, I want to rub it out." That's what God does

with our sins. He doesn't rub them in. He rubs them out. His Son Jesus Christ rubbed them out by his death on the cross for us.

The Bible says that God forgives instantly. There's no delay, no wait, no drawing it out or hesitation on His part. It's the exact opposite of the way we like to forgive. When we forgive we like people to suffer a while. We want to stick the knife in and have the person grovel, come back and beg and plead for forgiveness.

God forgives us completely. We like to hold on to a little bit of the guilt so we can have leverage against the person. You don't want to completely forgive them. Psalm 103:3 *"As far as east is from west, you have removed my sins from me."* East and west never end. And God says you're never going to see those sins again. He puts them out of reach.

Isaiah 38:17 *"You have cast all my sins behind Your back."* God doesn't want to look at them. He says, "Let's put them in the background. Let's not focus on them any more." Tonight, I leave my past behind. We cross the Jordan into another year and we are looking forward not backward. The past is behind us. It has been forgiven by Christ.

After the Israelites crossed over the Jordan River, they faced a bunch of enemies that would battle and fight against them. As a result many Israelites would be hurt, injured and die. Further, they did not know where they were going to live, how they would survive in this new land. As we cross into a new year, we will face challenges and heartbreak as well. We may have a health problem that causes us a good deal of pain, and puts us into the hospital. We may have pockets of cancer in us where the chemo just doesn't seem to work. We may get into a car accident. We may be hit financially with a crisis that may devastate our finances. One of our children may be hurt. Something will happen that will challenge our faith. The attitude that God wants us to have as we face these challenges is found in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Do you really believe that verse? There's nothing I can't master! That means there's nothing I'm going to hit in the next 365 days, no problem, no situation, no circumstance, no hassle that I can't handle, that I can't manage, that I'm not competent to handle.

On my own effort? Of course not! But *"...with the strength that Christ gives me."* Circle that phrase. With the help of Christ. We're not talking here about positive thinking. We're talking here about supernatural power. You're not just psyching yourself up -- "I think... I think ... I think I can... I think I can..." There are some things that, no matter how much you think you can, you can't. And no matter how much you think you can, you're not going to be able to do it. Not on my own power, but with the power that Christ gives me, I can handle it. The Bible is full of stories of people who handled incredible situations with the power that Christ supplies.

There was a young man by the name of David, who went to battle against a 9 ½ foot giant named Goliath. Looking at a small shepherd boy up against a humongous and skilled warrior, would lead you to believe, that David didn't have a chance. But what happened. David drew his power from the strength that God supplied him to deal with the situation. And who won the day. That's right. David had a direct hit with one stone from his slingshot. And a glorious victory was won for God's people that day.

It seems that every New Year's Eve, that some of us attempt to set some resolutions for the coming year. I remember 13 years ago, when I gave up smoking cigars. However, most of these resolutions or goals end up failing. But this year will be different. Christ is going to supply us with the power to fulfill these goals. But where do we begin. If you're a Christian, then your ultimate goal is to become more like Jesus Christ. So how did Jesus develop? Luke

2:52 it tells us four ways “*Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and favor with man.*” Circle those four things. This says if I want to become more like Christ, I need to develop the four ways Jesus developed. He developed in wisdom – that's intellectual development. He developed in stature – that's physical development. He developed in favor with God – that's spiritual development. He developed in favor with man – that's social development.

First in your intellectual area. Ask yourself, “What do I want to learn next year?” Remember the ad that said, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” God gave you your mind. It's a gift. It's like a muscle. If you use a muscle, it gets stronger. If you ignore a muscle, it atrophies. Same thing with your brain. You don't want to have an atrophied brain. Proverbs 19 “*Do yourself a favor and learn all you can. Remember what you've learned and you'll prosper.*” All leaders are learners. The moment you stop learning, you stop leading. Maybe you'd set a book reading goal and say you're going to read to say you're going to read a certain number of books this year. Maybe it'd be an educational goal: “I want to take a class at a community college or at the Lifelong Learning Center in the Villages. Maybe it would be to learn a language. Exercise that brain God gave you.

The second area is a physical goal. What will improve my health next year? Lose some weight? Go to bed earlier? Get on an exercise plan? Change my eating habits? Develop some kind of stress relief? Start walking everyday? The Bible is full a health tips. Proverbs 17 “*Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It's a slow death to be gloomy all the time.*” For some of you, God's health tip for you is, “Lighten up!” Don't sweat the small stuff. Realize it's all small stuff in God's eyes. Lighten up. “Being cheerful keeps you healthy.”

Spiritual goals. What will deepen my relationship to God? Maybe what you need to do to develop spiritually is to block out Sunday mornings for Bible study or Wednesdays in the Word. Maybe its time to join a small group. Maybe your goal is to start having a daily quiet time. But set something specific down so that at the end of this next year, you won't be going, “Did I grow any?” You had a plan.

Set a social goal. What will be my ministry to others? God doesn't want you to just think of yourself. God does not bless selfishness. 1 Peter 4 “*God's given you some special abilities. Be sure to use them to....*” Any time you help somebody else, that's called a ministry. It's called service. You serve God by serving others.

Less than 5% of Americans set goals or a plan for the coming year. But you now will be one of them. And the power of the cross will help you to fulfill these goals. “*When Christ died, He died to defeat the power of sin. Now see yourselves as being dead to the power of sin and alive to God.* When Jesus died on the cross, He paid for three things: He paid for the penalty of your sin in the past. That means I can be forgiven and that's good news. And that would be enough if that's all there was. He also paid to break the power of sin in the present. That means He gives me the energy to break the habits, hurts and hang-ups that are messing me up. He paid so that one day I will be released from the presence of sin forever. That's called heaven where there will be no sin. I'll be freed from not only the penalty and the power of it in my life, but the actual presence of sin in my life permanently. That is the power of the cross.

So today as we look back on the vanishing road of the old year, and look ahead to unknown road before us, we too may pause and hesitate at the thought “we have not passed this way before.” But then we hear the reassuring voice of our Savior by our side, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. With Him on our side, we can cross the Jordan unafraid; for we know that he is leading us on to the Promised Land. Happy New Year!