

3 Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. 2 After three days the officers went throughout the camp, 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.

Follow God

Remember the game, follow the leader? My brother and sister would run around the house following each other each one of us trying to lose the others or do something they couldn't do. After a while they would either get bored and move on to something else or we would reverse roles and go again. There was really no point to the game only follow until someone else became leader.

Our lesson this New Year's Eve comes from one of my favorite books as well as one of the best named books and the people have been playing follow the leader. This lesson was selected not because of the name of the leader or the fact that he has just taken lead of the people of Israel but because of who the leader points Israel to follow. Joshua tells them, "Follow God. Let's go where he goes." Why? Because they didn't know where there were going. They'd never been this way before but mostly because without God they don't stand a chance. They've learned something over the past 40 years.

Most of the time we don't know what will happen along the way, or when, where and how life will work out but neither did God's people. One thing they could be certain of is that God would not lead them astray. We know where we are going but the when, how, and what path that's a different story. Follow God. Let's go where he goes.

The long standing leader has passed on the lead to Joshua. Many tried to take charge and lead Israel off into another direction but that only lead to 40 years of walking around in circles waiting for an entire generation to die. What should have taken 16 days took 40 years all because the adults voted to choose another leader and go back to Egypt, all because 10 out of 12 spies didn't like the odds, all because of their unbelief their children had to wait and follow a cloud that circled in the desert.

That time had passed and they are ready to roll. Time to get pumped up and prepare to go where no Israelite had gone before. Joshua's stomach is probably turning in anticipation. He's been to this border once before and last time they didn't listen to him. Would they listen him this time? Joshua doesn't have another 40 years. Moses is gone. The Promised Land is ripe for the taking. With great anticipation and excitement they arrive at the banks of the Jordan River. And they stop.

There was one thing their new leader could not do for them. Even a simple task like crossing a river forced them to stop and recall all that happened in their journey. What has been passed down from their fathers. Maybe they remember what God did for them at the Red Sea when the Egyptian army was closing in. Thinking about all the blessings of God and the challenges set out before them. Why stop? Quite simply because God had not told them to go.

We too have stopped before the New Year. We too are reflecting on and remembering God's faithfulness over the past year while looking ahead at the challenges that stand before us. Maybe you recall the moments like Israel at the Red Sea or maybe you recall the wilderness of Zin. Either way here we are again at the beginning of a New Year. Just as Joshua, I too encourage you to follow God.

But there are a number of temptations that will lead away down a different path. One of those temptations that Israel would face is success. You're thinking, "Success? That's what we pray for." But success can lead us away. Tim Keller - writes, "More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are God, that our security and value rest in our own wisdom, strength and performance. To be the very best at what you do, to be at the top of the heap, means no one is like you. You are supreme." Success and even the approval of people aren't always blessings. Sometimes high paying jobs lead in a different direction away from church and even family. Sometimes the best paying job will ruin you spiritually and shipwreck your marriage.

Failure may also lead you to wonder if God hasn't left you at the banks of the Jordan. There are problems too big for us, too far out of our control. Problems that we

neither have the strength or ability to fix on our own - and like Israel all we can do is wait. You can't do this on your own.

Israel don't have too. Joshua points them to the Lord their God, *"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."*

The ark represents the person and promises of God. The fact that they are to follow it shows that God is leading. If they are to cross the Jordan and take possession of the land - it will be by God's power. That's the lesson God wanted Israel to learn. It wasn't by their strength or ability; it wasn't even because of their righteous character but because of God's mercy.

And to demonstrate to the people that God was with Joshua as he was with Moses he stopped the Jordan river. They follow when nothing makes sense. When you invade a country you don't send out a band of unarmed men carrying a box. You don't invade a country with women, children, and cattle in tow. You don't physically disable your fighting force (circumcision) once you've crossed over. You always have an exit strategy but this, this was a one way crossing and they knew it. They followed God.

We have what they have. God points us to his son and says, *"When you see Jesus follow him. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before"* Jesus is the person and promises of God. God is leading and it is not by our strength or our ability that we too will enter heaven but because of God's mercy. God leads us home. He forgives us when we wander and motivates us to follow him even more closely.

That won't always make sense. Neither does a bit of bread and wine connected to a promise or a splash of water connected to a promise. Follow him. It won't always be popular. People won't always like it. Remember who you follow. Your God who leads the way and calls, *"Take up your cross and follow me. My burden is easy and my yoke is light."*

Even if you aren't very good at following or leading when it comes to follow the leader - that doesn't matter. The great part is that we're not following you or me. We're following God. Let's go where he goes in 2017. Amen.