

The rich stories of the Old Testament often prefigure the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. The Book of Joshua “is at pains to show not only how Joshua carries on the work of Moses but how the ‘conquest’ of Canaan is continuous with the exodus from Egypt. This is seen in the repeated insistence that, as the LORD was with Moses, so he is with Joshua; and, especially, in the crossing of the Jordan River, which is patterned after the crossing of the Red Sea” (Intro Note).

The Ark of the Covenant contains the Ten Commandments and assures the people of the presence of God in their midst. As Joshua explains, “This is how you will know that there is a living God in your midst ... The ark of the covenant of the LORD of the whole earth will precede you into the Jordan. When the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the ark of the LORD, the LORD of the whole earth, touch the water of the Jordan, it will cease to flow” (Jos 3:10a, 11,13).

At the time of the Exodus, the waters of the Red Sea ceased to flow allowing the enslaved Israelites to cross on dry land thus escaping subjugation by the Pharaoh. In the fulfillment of time, Jesus will be baptized in the Jordan River. After his baptism, the heavens part and the holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice comes from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22). If not entirely apparent to the people there, then clearly to the Gospel writers, the entire Trinity is in the midst of the people assembled at the Jordan when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist.

The crossing of the Jordan is also a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus. “While all Israel crossed over on dry ground, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD remained motionless on dry ground in the bed of the Jordan until the whole nation had completed the passage” (Jos 3:17). Forty years of wandering in the desert comes to an end with the climatic entry into the Promised Land.

When Jesus dies, his motionless body is taken down from the cross and he is buried in the tomb. In descending to the dead, Jesus breaks the chains of sin and death. Those who had died, marked by the signs of faith, may now cross over from death to new life. “The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Mt 27: 51-52). Jesus, the firstborn of the dead, “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:5).

The crossing of the Jordan from the Book of Joshua is contrasted with a parable in the Gospel of Matthew about forgiveness. The master forgives a servant a great debt, but he in turn has no mercy and requires those who owe him a far lesser sum to pay up or face debtor’s prison. The master returns to punish the merciless servant. Jesus has freed us and paid the heavy price for our sins with his death on the cross. If we are to share in the promise of eternity, then we must follow the example of the LORD’s mercy and forgiveness.

After the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea on dry land, the waters began to flow again bringing death to Pharaoh’s charioteers. “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Mt 18:35).