

THE POINT OF NO RETURN - JOSHUA 4:1-24

NEW YEARS, 2008

Christopher Columbus, John Cabot and Jean Verrazano have several things in common. First, they were all famous explorers. Christopher Columbus made his famous journey in 1492 under the flag of Spain. John Cabot sailed to the new land under English authority 5 years later in 1497. Jean Verrazano was sent by King Francis I, king of France, in 1524. Each one in turn claimed land in the new country for his sponsor. This is the reason for Spain, England and France all claiming different parts of our country.

And these men also shared the courage necessary to persevere on course after passing the point of no return. Each of these men endured a near mutiny on his ship. And in each case, the critical crisis occurred just a few days before land was spotted. Fear and uncertainty almost conquered the hearts and minds of the 3 crews just a few days before victory was achieved. But each of these brave captains realized the truth of passing the point of no return. Each realized that on a trip such as the one they were taking, there came a point where the expedition had to press on to completion. Fresh water and food supplies had to be replenished. They simply had to find land in order to survive. So Columbus and Cabot and Verrazano each demonstrated the leadership skills necessary to finish the exploration.

But there is also an interesting 3rd observation about each of these famous explorers. Even though they sailed for different countries, they all shared a common national heritage. You see, Christopher Columbus' given name was Cristoforo Columbo. John Cabot's given name was Giovanni Caboto. Jean Verrazano's given name was Giovanni da Verrazano. Yes, it is true that Spain, England and France fought over the title for the new world. But each of their exploring ships was captained by an Italian.

It is important to know how to face a point of no return. Every pilot when flying over the sea has such a point called the point of no return. This simply means that the plane has traversed more than half the distance of the flight so that the destination is now closer than the starting point. If a problem arises, no matter what it might be, the pilot will try to reach the destination rather than go back after he has reached the point of no return.

Just a short way up the river from Niagara Falls there are large signs on the Niagara River's banks warning that any boat going further down river will go over the falls. It doesn't matter how powerful the boat is- once it has passed the point of no return, it must go on over the falls.

There are times in life when we pass a point of no return. In one way, every day would fit into this category. For each new day presents new challenges and opportunities that must be faced, and we cannot go back to relive yesterday. We usually don't think of each moment in time as a point of no return, however, but

we normally just go on living in our daily routines.

There are certain special times of the year when we become more acutely aware of the fleeting time of life. Birthdays can be such times. But especially, the celebration of a new year is such a time. For with each New Year's celebration, we are reminded afresh that another year has passed. We have passed another point of no return. We must move on into 2008. How should we face this point of no return in our lives?

I would like to direct you to a situation in the lives of the Children of Israel this morning as we consider this question. This certainly was an exciting time for them. But it must have been a fearful time as well. It was a time when they passed a point of no return.

The Israelites were poised on the threshold of the Promised Land for the second time. 40 years before, they had been in this same spot with Moses as their leader. At that time they had made a foolish decision. Their lack of faith had caused them to turn away from entering the Promised Land. So, God had directed them back into the wilderness to wander aimlessly for 40 years until that doubting generation passed on.

Now they were back again the second time. This time Joshua was their leader - Moses was now dead. And Joshua had just amazed them by performing the same miracle that Moses had performed earlier. Only those relatively few who were 40-60 had remembered the parting of the Red Sea, and many of those would have been so young that they couldn't remember clearly. The only exceptions were Joshua and Caleb. All the rest had only heard of this cataclysmic miracle. But now Joshua had done it again. Under his leadership the Jordan River had been parted during flood season and the children of Israel had crossed over on dry ground. And then the river had closed behind them. What a dramatic and exciting time for each one who walked across between the walls of water.

But then when the Jordan River closed back up, the thought must have come to each and every mind. Oh, Oh. Now we are stuck here. There is no escape. We have passed the point of no return. We are here in the land with the enemy. Like a person entering the lion's cage only to hear the door's lock click behind him, so the Israelites must have felt somewhat fearful and trapped. How would they respond to this passing the point of no return?

I would invite you to look at 3 principles with me from Joshua 4 that I feel will be helpful to us as we seek to answer this question and as we face this brand new year. For these principles can help us to enter this New Year with confidence.

READ Josh. 4:1-9.

JOS 4:1 When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones ³ from the middle of

the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

JOS 4:4 So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

JOS 4:8 So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. ⁹ Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

1. The first principle is to Remember God's past blessings.

God directed Joshua to do something very interesting and unusual as they crossed the Jordan River. They were to take 12 stones (one for each of the tribes of Israel) from the middle of the Jordan River bed in order to make an altar or monument on the western bank of the river.

Now, at first, the Israelites must have thought the directive that Joshua gave to them from the Lord to be very strange. Lug 12 stones out of the middle of the Jordan River bed. What an unusual request. It was not as if there weren't enough rocks by the side of the Jordan's banks. Anyone who has been to Israel knows that the one commodity that is not lacking anywhere there is stones. Houses are even made out of stone. Why not gather some stones from the side of the River.

But no. These stones were to be very unusual stones. They were to be instructive stones. So they must be taken right from the middle of the River. Their purpose was to remind the people of God's great power of deliverance. Their purpose was to instruct future generations and give to them encouragement and strength.

You see, passing a point of no return does not mean a failure to draw upon the wisdom and strength from the past. No, a person who passes the point of no return with confidence is a person who builds his present upon the best foundation of the past.

We all have altars of stones which we have built in the inner recesses of our memories. These are reminders of God's power and faithfulness in our lives. And these altars are very important for us to keep in remembrance, and to pass on to our children. For these altars give confidence in passing points of no return.

I love the city of Chicago. Maybe it's the energy, maybe it's the diversity, maybe it's nostalgia from my

childhood, I can't pinpoint the exact reasons. But I love visiting Chicago. And every time I drive by a certain spot on the Dan Ryan expressway, I see an imaginary altar there.

I had recently graduated from Seminary and my wife, Sandy, and I were still trying to build up a small financial reserve. We needed a more dependable car so I had checked the ads in the paper and had settled on a well-used green Pontiac. Even though it had over a hundred thousand miles, the engine purred. Now my practice was to always take a used car to a mechanic friend of mine so that he could give it a thorough check up, but we received a phone call from Sandy's father on the night I brought the Pontiac home. Sandy's parents were missionaries in Japan. Vern was flying into O'Hare airport arriving late the next morning. Would I be available to pick him up at the airport and bring him back to our home in Grand Rapids? Well, in situations like this plans change, so I said I'd be glad to drop everything and make an airport run to Chicago the next morning.

I was making good time on that warm summer morning. The closer I got to the city, the more traffic I encountered, but that was normal. I was in the left lane of the Dan Ryan expressway cruising along at about 60 mph when I heard a horn begin to blast away to my right. I looked out my right hand window to see a fellow in a car in the far right hand lane of the highway leaning on his horn with his right hand and pointing at my car with his left hand. I couldn't hear what he was yelling, of course, but I thought I could read his lips. It looked like he was yelling, *tie rod*.

The hair raised on the back of my neck. Could he be trying to tell me that there was a problem with my tie rod? I knew that I couldn't take any chances because the right and left tie rods connect the steering wheel to the front tires. Without tie rods there is no steering control. I immediately took my foot off the gas pedal but knew that I couldn't hit the brakes without totally losing control of the car. Hitting the switch to turn on my flashers, I let the car slow down. If he had seen a problem with a tie rod on my car, it must be the right one because he couldn't see the left tie rod from that angle. I remember thinking how fortunate I was to be driving on a straight stretch of road. After my car had coasted down to below 40 mph, I began to edge the car ever so slightly to the left trying to get it off the highway. I could tell that I only had control of the left front wheel. When all four wheels were off the highway and the car was going about 25, I hit the brakes as hard as I could. Just as I suspected, the car turned in circles as it skidded to a stop.

My new friend had pulled his car off the road on the right side of highway. Collecting my thoughts, I got out of the car and waited for an opportunity to cross over to his side. He greeted me with amazement. *I've never seen anything like that*, he exclaimed. *For some reason I was looking at your tire and I saw your right tie rod fall right down to the pavement*. After I thanked him for his diligent observation, I learned he was

a mechanic who just happened to have a shop with a tow truck right off the next exit. In short order he drove me to his shop where we picked up his tow truck to go back for my car.

I remember thinking aloud with him in the tow truck about all of the “coincidences” that we had just witnessed. I had been driving in the far left lane which was not my normal practice. He had been driving in the far right lane. On the busy Dan Ryan Expressway there had been several lanes free between our two cars. The positions of both of our cars allowed him the angle to be able to see the tie rod fall. On the busy expressway, he had been looking at my tire right at the moment when the tie rod fell. He was a mechanic so he immediately knew the seriousness of the situation. He owned a repair shop just off the next exit. He also owned a tow truck that could bring in my disabled car to be repaired. Some might say that these were all just random coincidences, but they will never be able to convince me.

Within a half an hour my car was on his lift and he was putting a new right tie rod on my car. All the while he was working he was telling anyone who would listen about his astonishment at seeing that tie rod fall off the car. *I've just never seen anything like that*, he kept saying over and over again. Soon there were over 20 guys standing around the lift listening to him retelling the story again and again. Of course, there was ample opportunity for me to share that I was going to O'Hare to pick up my missionary father-in-law. I was also able to share not only my appreciation for all that my new mechanic friend had done and was doing for me, but my belief that my loving Father in heaven had been watching out for me as well. A captive audience hanging on every word of a testimony of God's protection and goodness – what more could any preacher want. Within a hour, the car was finished and I was on my way to the airport. I arrived about 15 minutes before Vern's plane's wheels hit the ground.

Whenever I drive by that spot on the Dan Ryan, I see an imaginary altar by the side of the road. It's an altar that reminds me of God's protective hand in my life. We all have altars that we need to remember.

2. But there is a second principle that is important to note. And that is to Prepare for the battles ahead.

READ Josh. 4:12, 13.

¹² The men of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over, armed, in front of the Israelites, as Moses had directed them. ¹³ About forty thousand armed for battle crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for war.

Now isn't this an interesting detail that is given in the Scriptures. The tribes of Reuben, Gad and the ½ tribe of Manasseh had chosen their inheritance east of the Jordan River. They were given that inheritance on the condition that their soldiers would fight along with their brother Israelites until the Promised Land was taken.

As the soldiers crossed the dried up river bed, they marched ready and prepared for battle. I think if I were to walk across a parted sea, I would be tempted to be impressed with the miracle, wouldn't you? Wouldn't it be quite a temptation to examine those walls of water for a while, perhaps to even reach out and touch them? But these Israelites were marching across prepared to fight. Now the reality was that there wouldn't be any battles for a while. In fact, there wouldn't be any conflict until the Israelites initiated it. But they were ready.

We have to realize that there are battles to be fought this year. Many battles are lost because the soldiers aren't ready to fight.

One of the pivotal battles of the Revolutionary War was the battle of Trenton that happened right at this time of year 232 years ago. To this point, the British had gained some early and substantial victories. The early British strategy was to launch a 2 pronged attack on New England. Carleton's troops would advance through the Hudson River passageway while General Howe led his men to capture New York City and then north. This would eliminate New Englander's from the war. Then the British army could conquer the Mid Atlantic States and on into the Southern ones. George Washington was quickly driven off of Long Island, and he had to fall back to White Plains. British General Howe marched on to attack Fort Washington in northwest Manhattan and took it easily and quickly. This opened the way to New Jersey, and the British troops quickly poured in. Things looked quite bleak indeed for the young American soldiers.

But then a group of our revolutionary soldiers lead by Gen. George Washington ferried across the icy Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776. They marched quickly and almost silently towards Trenton. The Hessian soldiers there hired by the British were completely surprised. Buoyed by all the recent victories, they hadn't dreamed that the American soldiers would have the courage to attack. And especially, they didn't think that they would move out on Christmas day. So they weren't prepared. They were feasting and partying. They were having a good, old time. And almost without a fight, 1,000 of them were taken prisoner on the day after Christmas. They weren't prepared for battle. So they were easily defeated.

God has given to us armor for the spiritual battle. Make no mistake about it. There are going to be battles this next year. But we have been given armor with which to fight.

*the belt of truth. The wide belt of the Roman soldier guarded the abdomen muscles of the body, the fulcrum of the body's strength. God's truth is our strength, a vital piece of armor.

*the breastplate of righteousness. This protects the chest area where the vital organs are housed. The heart symbolizes the source of our affections. Our emotions need to be protected by God's righteousness. Another vital piece of armor.

*the gospel of peace as shoes on our feet. Our feet picture our walk. God does not desire for

Christians to live lives characterized by anxiety and worry. No, his design is for his people to walk in peace. Both peace with God, and the peace of God.

*the shield of faith. The shield protects from the fiery darts of the enemy. As Satan assaults us with his accusations and temptations, it is our faith which quenches those fiery darts. Faith is an indispensable piece of armor to us.

*the helmet of salvation. The helmet protects the head area which houses the mind, the intellect. The world tries to conform us to its mold, but God has saved us from that and transforms our mind, our thinking.

*the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. Our offensive weapon. The word of God. The written word which we can memorize and use to defend ourselves in temptation. The living word who lives within who provides the power to deliver us from our sinful nature.

*God has provided armor for us so that we might be equipped for battle. We must avail ourselves of it and use it wisely if we are to be victorious. So when we face a point of no return, we must be sure that we are ready for the battle that lies ahead. This coming year will bring many battles our way. But we can be victorious in all of them as we are armored and ready to face them.

3. And the armor that God has provided for us allows us to come to the 3rd and final principle with confidence. And that is simply to Go forward in the strength and fear of the Lord.

READ Josh. 4:24

²⁴ He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God."

*The purpose in God's showing His miraculous power in the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River is stated here very plainly and simply. God parted these waters so that the Israelites and all of the other people of the earth who would hear of these miracles might know the power of God and therefore fear him as they should.

*God is a powerful God. And He wants to demonstrate that power to us and through us.

*Illustration: A little more than 100 years ago, the Methodist Church of Swan Quarter, North Carolina needed to move because they had grown. They tried to buy a certain plot of ground, but the atheist who owned it just laughed at them. So they built their church on Oyster Creek Road instead. It was not the ideal location, but it was the best they could afford. On Sunday, Sept. 16, 1876 the building was completed and dedicated.

3 days later it started to rain. For 2 days, the waters poured from the heavens. The creek began to flood. After the rains stopped, everyone in town witnessed a dramatic scene- it made such an impact that the courthouse in Swan Quarter still has documents testifying to historicity of what happened. The flood waters

lifted that recently dedicated church up off its foundation. The church then began to float like a huge boat down the creek which had become swollen into a river. Town people tried to stop it and tie it down, but in vain. No, that church floated right down stream into town. And then it did something even more dramatic. It turned up one of the tributaries and began to float upstream. That's right. Against the current. And do you know what happened. That church floated right to that original plot of land that the church had wanted to purchase, it centered itself in just the right spot, and then it waited there for the waters to subside. And it settled, completely unharmed, ready for worship the next Sunday.

That atheist who owned the land was so amazed that he became a believer and then donated the land to the church. The townspeople have never forgotten that incident- they still talk about it when they refer to the church. God had demonstrated his power so that people learned to fear him as they should.

*We all have passed a point of no return. The curtain of 2007 has closed behind us, the adventure of 2008 awaits ahead. God wants this year to be a successful one in each of our lives. But in order for it to be so, we are going to have to :

- *remember God's blessings of the past. This will give to us the foundation of confidence that we need.

- *be prepared for the battles that lie ahead. For there will be many adversaries that we must each face this year. We must be equipped with the armor of God.

- *go forward in the strength and fear of the Lord.