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# Attentive Church Leadership

*Listening and  
Leading in  
a World We've  
Never Known*



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# 1

## How Did We Get to a World We've Never Known?

IN 1964, THE YEAR BEFORE I (Kevin) was born, Bob Dylan released the song “The Times, They Are A-Changin’.” He challenged his audience to learn to sink or swim in a world going through radical shifts. Nearly sixty years after Dylan penned those words, the times are a-changin’ once again. Generational theorists say a dominant generation is often followed by a recessive generation. One generation erupts into the spotlight while another one lives in the shadows. In other words, we can expect massive shifts to occur roughly every two generations.

Let’s go back to the first part of the twentieth century. My (Kevin’s) father, Leighton Ford, lived through massive change. He came into a world in 1931 in which most North American homes did not have a telephone or television, and people received their national news by tuning into a nightly radio broadcast. Dad vividly recalls being glued to the CBC Radio every Saturday, listening to Foster Hewitt’s *Hockey Night in Canada*. He tuned in nightly to WXYZ radio station in Detroit to follow the adventures of the Green Hornet, the Lone Ranger, or Jack Armstrong, the American Boy. Dad was born during the Great Depression, which was called the “Dirty Thirties” in Canada. Most people washed their clothes by hand, grew much of their own food, and cooked three meals a day. Only about half of homes used electricity. Widespread economic upheaval resulted in massive political and social changes throughout North America.

In Dad's nine decades, society experienced substantial inventions, innovations, and transformations. If a person traveled in a time machine from the 1930s to the 2020s, the number of advancements in technology, communication, travel, and commerce would overwhelm them.

But change is nothing new. Life cycles through seasons of change.

We are currently living in a massive communication shift from the Broadcast Era to the Digital Era. During the previous era, a few talking heads like Walter Cronkite controlled the flow of news to most of the nation. Today, literally thousands of news options are instantly available. In the old era, three primary television broadcasting companies (ABC, CBS, and NBC) provided at-home entertainment. During the "Sweeps Weeks," each of the three networks put out their best movies and mini-series to compete for viewership. Sixty percent of American households (an estimated 125 million people) watched the series finale of *M\*A\*S\*H* in 1983, and 53 percent (83 million in the United States and an estimated 350 million worldwide) found out who shot J. R. Ewing in 1980. These massive numbers represent the limited options for viewing entertainment at home in the 1980s. Today, due to digital streaming, an uncountable number of companies, options, and services are available to watch at home, in the car, or deep in the woods—as long as you have your phone or tablet. The digital transformation has immensely affected communication, transportation, and production.

Yes, the times, they are a-changin'. Imagine the following account happening today in New York City:

Marchers filed past the reviewing stand hour after hour. The day was Thursday, June 6, 1946; the place, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. It was two years to the day since the Allies landed on the Normandy beaches, the nation now paused to give thanks and reflect on its collective heritage. But the marchers were not soldiers or war heroes. They were children: little girls in starched pinafores, wearing white dress gloves and carrying bouquets of spring flowers; little boys in neatly ironed white shirts with clip-on bow ties and

paper hats. Together they marched, accompanied by brass bands and floats, past rows of admiring parents and grandparents. In the reviewing stand, Brooklyn's mayor, the governor of New York, and a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court gave their approval. By public declaration, all schools were closed for the day. In all, approximately ninety thousand youngsters participated. The event was the 117th annual Sunday School Union parade.<sup>1</sup>

Now, it is hard to even imagine a world where public school is canceled for a Sunday school parade, with a Supreme Court Justice on the reviewing stand.

The world described in this Prospect Park vignette seems light years from today. The decade following that event brought the highest church membership and church attendance of any decade in American history. Church buildings went up at an astonishing rate. Many denominations employed a paid architecture department to help with building plans. The GI Generation joined congregations, Kiwanis organizations, and bridge clubs. Suburbs popped up across the American landscape. The church and society were wed together in a form of American Christendom.

That world is gone for many reasons, and we now live in a post-Christian culture. New generations with different value systems have surfaced. Technology brought an acceleration to the changes we face. Throughout this book, we will try to unwrap the dimensions of this new world. Church leaders have never gone this way before. We will also explore what it means to be attentive to God in the midst of such challenges and transitions. We'll invite you to walk with us through a biblical passage in which Joshua encountered enormous change.

### **Transition: Changing Leaders**

Transitions are a normal part of life, but they are rarely easy. In 1998, I (Kevin) cofounded a company called TAG Consulting. We coached leaders and provided organizational development services across virtually

every industry in the United States. Our bread and butter, however, came from a handful of large contracts with federal agencies. Following a series of government shutdowns and sequestrations, my partners and I decided it was time to sell the company. We did our best to make sure all of our employees were taken care of in the transition. My partners and I skipped multiple paychecks to take care of our employees. Yet, several of our long-term workers were angry that we were selling the business. It was one of the most difficult transitions in my life. Still, I knew God was involved in that decision. Had we not trusted him then, I never would have been able to join my dad at LFM.

I (Jim) once had the privilege of succeeding a legendary pastor who served that congregation for thirty-six years. I knew I could never fill those shoes. My inadequacy and inexperience would be hard to hide. The congregation was also aware of the difficulty of accepting the change of person and style. The greatest gift I received was the outgoing pastor's unqualified acceptance and encouragement. Serving in that role was the hardest ministry I ever encountered, but I sensed God was behind the whole situation, and I knew he would prevail in spite of me.

The first chapter of Joshua begins with the phrase, "after the death of Moses" (Joshua 1:1). It's impossible for us in the twenty-first century to imagine that difficult juncture. The United States elects a new president every four or eight years. From 1981 to 2021, our country lived under seven different presidents. The people of ancient Israel, however, had the same primary leader for four decades.

The presence, wisdom, and provision of God consistently marked Moses' life and leadership—from challenging the most powerful man in their world and winning, to parting the Red Sea, to miraculously intervening during the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. After Moses' long tenure, it was probably unthinkable to be led by anyone else. And even though the Israelite people did not have the best track record respecting and following a leader, they were accustomed to Moses. They were familiar with his communication style and leadership strategy. They knew what to expect. And humans tend to like the familiar.

Then Moses died, and suddenly, Joshua had to lead two million people. Israel was thrust into its biggest leadership transition in forty years. This was not only a change in leadership but a change in direction. Because of the previous generation's disobedience, the nation "circled the airport" for many years, wandering around in the wilderness near Mount Sinai. But now, God prepared to give them an entirely new set of directions. They were about to enter a completely different phase. They would transform from wanderers to possessors. And the ripples of God's kingdom would continue.

Sometimes change comes to us in the form of an unexpected setback. In January 1983, my (Jim's) wife, Sara, experienced a surprising medical challenge that required immediate emergency surgery. It frightened us on so many fronts. I was finishing my last semester of seminary, and she earned our income as a nurse. After surgery, the doctors told us she could not work for ten weeks while she recuperated. I quickly realized I could not afford to finish school. All tallied, the expenses facing us the next four months until graduation came to \$2,322. Today that sum might not seem overwhelming, but to a graduate student in 1983 it was mammoth. In today's dollars, that would be \$7,013. I was downcast for many reasons. I would need to drop out and work to support our family of three. It was sobering, compounded with my doubts about entering ministry the following summer.

The next morning, I went to the mailbox and received a letter from my childhood best friend, Dale Boaz. We had not communicated for several months. He had included a check for \$2,322, written and mailed three days before Sara went to the hospital. I fell to my knees in awe and wonder. How could this be?

I called Dale, thanked him for the check, and asked why he sent that amount. For weeks he had tried to sell his car unsuccessfully. Dale told God that if he helped him sell his car, he would donate one-third of the amount to someone in ministry. On New Year's Eve, 1982, a drunk driver crashed into his parked car, totaling it. The insurance company gave him \$6,966, and one-third of that was exactly \$2,322. He then felt compelled

to send it to me. Receiving that gift was the signal I needed to continue on my path to ordained ministry.

Isaac Watts wrote the hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” after Queen Anne of England died. The timeless words reminded English Christians of the preeminence of the Lord—he would be with them in the future as he was with past generations:

O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.

Joshua and his people would need to trust that reality without Moses in their midst. God was still their hope for years to come, and they would need to listen to him.

## Struggle

Most of us have experienced various transitions—promotions, moves, losses, and disappointments. After each change, we probably knew the next day was going to be different from the previous one. Some transitions are exciting, like the birth of a baby, but others are mostly difficult. We don’t know exactly how it will all work out, and we fear letting go of our normal. We embrace a comfortable routine, sometimes forgetting that trials and changes can be blessings in disguise and good tools for our development. In the summer of 2012, through a deep sense of calling, I (Jim) left a wonderful position in a church to begin teaching in a seminary. The dynamics of academic life are quite different from preaching and leading a large congregation. I distinctly remember one dark December afternoon I had no Christmas Eve service to plan for—just papers to grade while a cold wind howled outside my window. I sat there wondering if I had really heard God’s call after all. Everything seemed so different from how I thought it would be.

Life coach Dan Miller writes,



How do you view the struggles in your life? Do you do whatever you can to avoid them? Or do you see them as necessary steps for growth? Do you suspect evil forces are bombarding you? Or could it be that God is allowing the struggles to bring about your transformation? . . . Can you recall a time when you yearned for relief from a tough situation? Did the struggle teach you something important?

He goes on to ask,

And what about now? Is losing a job or dealing with the pressures of a business limiting your opportunities—or preparing you for a burst of new success? Perhaps you're in the process of entering a new chapter of your life. Don't sabotage your growth with a Band-Aid solution!<sup>2</sup>

We are living through several major cultural transitions. So much has been changing for years, but the acceleration of adjustments that came in the early 2020s has shaken many Christian leaders. This recent season of cultural transition has brought much bewilderment. As Israel moved away from their wilderness home, Moses' leadership, and the daily provision of bread, they experienced seven challenges and changes.

### **Blocked by the Jordan River**

In the third chapter of Joshua, the people of Israel camped by the Jordan River. They sat at the edge of the Promised Land after spending forty years in the wilderness. Their wait was not as long as the Chicago Cubs' 108-year wait to win the 2016 World Series. But they waited a long time, wondering when God would fulfill his promise.

They faced one big problem: the Jordan River was at flood stage, and there were no bridges (Joshua 3:15). Nor were there boats to get a huge group of people across. Today it doesn't look very formidable. In the 1930s, the Degania Dam was completed as part of Pinhas Rutenberg's Naharayim hydroelectric power plant project. Then, in 1964, it was repurposed to control water levels flowing from the Sea of Galilee into the Jordan River so as to not flood farmland downstream. As a result, today's

Jordan resembles a calm body of water. But in Joshua's day during harvest time, the river was a mile wide and 150 feet deep at flood stage.

Imagine getting two million people across this river into Canaan on foot. The Lord instructed them to camp out next to the river for three days. Perhaps God wanted the people to stare at their impossibility. He wanted the reality that this task was way beyond their ability to sink deep into their spirits. Remember, God often sets a humanly impossible obstacle in our path before he does a new thing in our lives. Steve Farrar wrote, "God had led them into the crisis. He created the crisis, just as He did for their parents at the Red Sea forty years earlier."<sup>3</sup>

How do you respond when there is a great barrier between you and where you think you are going—especially when you have waited a long time to get there? Surely, the Jewish parents and grandparents remembered and passed down the story of Moses and the Red Sea. It was an essential part of their identity as a people. The Red Sea was an even larger barrier than the Jordan, and Pharaoh pursued them with his entire army. Yet God stepped in, performing one of the Bible's greatest miracles. Whenever the people shared that account during their wilderness wanderings, they were reminded of God's provision. That is why to this day we rehearse biblical texts. They build our trust in the Lord and help us remember.

Remembering faithfully is essential to Christian discipleship. We must habitually focus our minds on true, noble, good, and godly ideas (Philippians 4:8). Remembering helps us to not only react to changing circumstances but also to respond to the reality of the Lord and his truth. But would the Israelites remember correctly now that the Jordan was in front of them? Would they trust God and adapt to this new set of circumstances, or would they give up in fear and uncertainty? And what about us? Will we remember faithfully amid church decline, global events, and political and racial tensions? And will we remember what God has done even ten years from now when we face other challenges? I (Jim) have to regularly remember the gift of Dale Boaz when I face new confusing circumstances.

When we encounter new barriers, we tend to forget basic theological realities: God knows us, he has a plan for our lives, he is not surprised by

our problems, and he knows how to get us through or around them. Marriages sometimes get difficult. You and your spouse want to grow together, but then a barrier forms between you both. You can't see how to get past it, and you forget what drew you together in the first place. A good friendship might go through this as well. You and your friend have a good history together, but suddenly a flooded river of misunderstanding arises. Businesses and jobs experience the same thing. An unforeseen problem raises its head, and you don't know how to navigate it.

Today, congregations feel this kind of barrier. Many churches plateaued years ago, and now they feel stuck. Culture has changed drastically, and Christian leaders don't know how to cross the river from where we are to where we want to go. Churches and ministries have tried various approaches, but nothing feels fixed or safe. The troubles of the recent past have uncovered many new cracks in the foundation of congregations around politics, race, religious freedom, and safety. Do we remember God's past faithfulness, or do we stop remembering correctly and grow anxious? It's easy to forget and feel stuck.<sup>4</sup>

I (Jim) have lived long enough to see various institutions at flood stage on this side of the Jordan River. In 1991, I was the pastor of a congregation near Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. There was so much uncertainty. Morale was low, much like the pay scale. The school's mission swung back and forth for years in the '70s and '80s, depending on the tenure of presidents. Pockets of promise popped up, but a bright future was hard to read. What's more, painful events surrounding the school from 1991 to 1992 felt like a river of grief. Several unusual student deaths occurred that year, and two gruesome murders happened that winter among Whitworth families. A popular professor, Jerry Sittser, lived through a catastrophic accident in which his wife, mother, and daughter all died. I wondered how Whitworth would ever get beyond this river of troubles. However, a year later, an interim president named Phil Eaton arrived. Slowly, encouragement began to grow. Then a new president, Bill Robinson, came to the school and had an immediate impact on students and faculty. The identity of Whitworth was revived, and a long season of

thriving occurred. Applications and admissions soared. The climate on campus grew much more vibrant. New dorms were built, classroom buildings were added, and Whitworth's status within the community rose significantly. God was not finished with what he had started.

In our work with pastors and congregations, we often hear of insurmountable barriers. What do we do when the way to God's promise is not clearly accessible? About 65–85 percent of American congregations have plateaued or are declining. Mainline denominations stopped growing around 1965. Some congregations along the way made the painful switch of adding a contemporary service and grew until about 2005. But since then, many congregations have struggled, unsure of how to reach young adults who do not fit historic congregations. Millennials and Gen Z individuals are certainly not flocking to the Christian faith in our country. How do churches relate and adapt to a new day and younger generations?

### **The Promised Land**

The Jordan River was a barrier blocking the entrance to Canaan. While we tend to associate the Promised Land with milk and honey, it also involved a purpose and a mission for Israel. Canaan was to be their home. In Genesis 12, when God promised Abraham to make a great nation, he planned to form a model people in the Promised Land so they would be a "light for the nations" (Isaiah 49:6 ESV). By their collective witness they would draw all nations to the Lord, thereby restoring what was damaged during the fall. God's great design was not only to free them from Egypt but for them to become his light in a dark world.

During the wilderness wandering years, their natural inclinations got in the way of living the life God designed for them. Forty years later, they were a questionable group of untrusting, unfaithful, and disobedient people. But God was ready to take them out of the wilderness and fulfill his promises. He had released them from Egyptian bondage, shaped them during their wanderings, and was now ready to give them victory.

God calls all of us into a marvelous plan for his preferred future. The Promised Land today is not somewhere in the Middle East but wherever

Jesus continues to establish his kingdom. The rule and reign of Jesus in our midst allows us to remember the values he provided so we can walk in those realities. He wants to use our lives to have an ever-increasing ripple effect in our world. Today, the Promised Land might take many shapes and forms. It may even feel like learning how to flourish when we find ourselves in a place we don't want to be. Like the Jewish exiles, we may ask, "How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4).

Kasr el-Dabar, a congregation in Cairo, is a dynamic church just off the city's main square. We're not sure we've seen a congregation with more regional impact. They host worship in their sanctuary every night of the week. They are not just relaxing in their Promised Land. Their circumstances are hard. Yet, the ministry is flourishing all over their area.

Emmanuel Muhammed, a former Imam with a PhD in Islamic law, was a student of mine (Jim) and is now in Nigeria. Jesus once appeared to him in a profound and mystical way on the road to Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. He now uses the gospel to reach former Muslims and trains them in the Word of God. He has faced severe persecution and the loss of his birth family. There are daily challenges, but he is focused on the passion of his calling to redeem what is in deep need of repair.

Karen Swanson is one of our mentoring leaders for LFM. She heads the Institute for Prison Ministries at the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. Incarceration can be a terrible experience, one devoid of hope. Through her ministry, Karen gives inmates opportunities to worship, which helps them get their minds off their imprisonment and connect spiritually with other believers and something greater than themselves. "Lost people are drawn in. The unbelievers want what the believers have," she said. These worship opportunities then open doors for the gospel to spread in the prison.<sup>5</sup>

### **Following the Ark**

When you face a barrier, remember that God has a plan and the means to get you across. The Lord instructed Joshua to let the Ark of the Covenant

lead their crossing of the Jordan: “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” (Joshua 3:3).

God wanted Joshua and the people of Israel to follow the Ark into the river. The Ark was a chest about three feet and nine inches long, and two feet and three inches wide and high, covered with gold both inside and outside. It held the tablets of the law, the Ten Commandments, Aaron’s rod, and a jar of manna. A golden lid, decorated with two golden angels, covered it. This was known as the mercy seat, where the Jews believed God’s presence resided.

God instructed Moses about the Ark’s construction at Mount Sinai. This central piece of the people’s worship journeyed with them through all of their wilderness wanderings. Carrying the Ark into the water symbolized God’s leading them into the land of promise. The Lord literally was going before them.

Today we do not need the Ark. As believers, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, a deposit of our spiritual inheritance. We have God’s Word preserved through the ages to reveal his truth, purposes, and ways, as he wants to relate to us personally. Jesus, speaking of himself as a Shepherd, said, “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3-4). A basic part of walking with the Lord today is learning not to do our own thing but to follow.

### **A Way You Have Never Been Before**

After telling Joshua to follow the Ark, God said, “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” (Joshua 3:4).

God took these people a way they had not been before. Waging war, conquering enemies, living as landowners, farming the land, and settling down as free people were all new to them. They knew how to be slaves

and nomads, but they had never been independent and established. That is an important aspect of the nature of God's leading. Despite his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this generation would be the one to finally take ownership.

Moving from pilgrimage to possession can be scary. When a child leaves home for the first time, she certainly feels excited about new opportunities. But she may also feel angst as she wonders how to journey through the maze of adulthood without the direct support of parents. For Israel, the road ahead was unclear and uncharted. Because of the unknown nature of their journey, they needed to get behind the Lord and follow him.

We don't follow an Ark. Yet, as individuals and collectively as a congregation, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Following the Holy Spirit reminds us of the way of Jesus and regularly takes us to places we haven't been before. The New Testament gives evidence of an early church through whom the Spirit of God worked. Various preachers through the years have suggested the Acts of the Apostles should actually be named the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Before his death, Jesus assured his disciples of a Helper who would follow, one who would guide and equip them through their pilgrimage.

After pastoring for nearly three decades, I (Jim) was invited to teach at a seminary. It meant learning many new things, and every day I was aware of how far behind I was in certain areas. But I feel great joy and delight because God has led me to train and pour my life into the next generation of pastors. I am going a way I have never been before.

Three years into my new career as a seminary professor, Sara and I became full-time caregivers as grandparents to our two year-old grandson. Living daily with a dynamic child has been a rich experience. I now coach Little League baseball again in my sixties. Chicken nuggets are in our freezer, and Christmas morning starts very early again. We thought we would be entering the empty nester years. Instead, we have never been this way before.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley and the Methodists brought the church where it had not been before. A Great Awakening began, and a Methodist way emerged that brought life to a tired old church. Small groups known as bands and class meetings began to shape the church in a whole new way, leading to immense growth.

The church in China in 1949 felt defeated when the communist government sent the missionaries home. But they went a way they had not been before and set up underground house churches. Eventually, the church in China exploded with growth.

Becoming a church on mission to our surrounding community requires a new way. I (Kevin) had the privilege of leading worship at Singapore 87, a conference sponsored by the Lausanne Movement for three hundred young evangelical leaders from more than sixty nations. I heard a sermon there I'll never forget. A business owner named Kent Humphreys talked about how frogs wait for food to come to them while lizards seek out their food. Churches today need to be more like lizards and less like frogs. Our call is to go where people live, work, and play with the good news of Jesus. So many churches want to keep things the same and stay inside their buildings. But if we do, we will remain on the east side of the Jordan and miss our opportunity. Following God requires a willingness to go new places. That goes for individuals and congregations.

We have lived through so much change in our culture. The 1960s brought televisions to every home, rock and roll music, the sexual revolution, and racial unrest. The Watts riots occurred in Los Angeles in 1965. The turbulent 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago resembled the chaotic pulse of a country rocked by the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Woodstock symbolized bold new expressions of music and sexual freedom. We participated in an unpopular Vietnam War. By the 1970s, we were disillusioned by Watergate and the resignation of a president. Consumerism and individualism became social norms. The roots of a strange kind of cultural narcissism emerged.





The church adapted by creating what we today call the attractional church. We put on great events, hoping for many people from our communities and cities to come hear the gospel. Megachurch leaders like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels as well as the Community Church of Joy developed programmatic church structures with something for everyone. My (Kevin's) uncle, Billy Graham, effectively capitalized on the Broadcast Era to lead millions of people to Jesus. However, it wasn't all positive. Andy Stanley called it the cafeteria approach to church. We offered as many programs for all ages as possible, giving people lots to choose from to keep them happy. Without knowing it, we introduced a Trojan horse of consumerism into the church world. Maybe we followed the Ark well, or perhaps we took a detour.

Today, many churches are struggling. The attractional church, which was crafted for the cultural moment of the baby boomers from the 1970s through the 1990s, has plateaued because it does not fit later generations in the same way. This is a world we've never known.

The loss is not uniform in all regions of the country. There are amazing exceptions, such as the growth of immigrant churches, which are much less consumer-oriented. But for the most part, our congregations have not adapted to this culture because we are conditioned to the attractional model. In this new era, there are new ideas about what the church needs to become. Surely we must be attentive to the leading of God's Spirit, as we do not have a map for this particular region. Instead of entering a promised land, it feels more like entering a period of exile where we do not understand the culture and challenges before us.

Many more changes came with the new millennium. Since 9/11, security protocol at airports, the post office, and government buildings is forever changed. The advent of social media drastically altered the way people communicate. The internet brought significant change to commerce for every industry. The world experienced political polarization unlike anything in recent years. And the Covid-19 pandemic challenged many accepted norms, led to greater health consciousness, and forced society to deal with fear in unprecedented ways.

Our society now is post-Christian. The early church did remarkable evangelism with pre-Christian Rome. But this is a world we've never known. A negative perception of Christianity exists in our culture. Trust in the church has dropped dramatically. There is no designated sacred time when our society makes time for faith. We struggle to afford the buildings that house our worship. And technology has changed the very patterns of communication that transmitted the gospel for several decades.

In larger churches, multisite campuses have become the norm. The advent of podcasting and live streaming makes thousands of church services and sermons instantly available. A family in Ukraine can watch a congregation's worship service in Texas every week. A teen in Atlanta can listen to a podcast recorded weekly in Tel Aviv. There is a move away from the traditional church. People are meeting in homes, coffee shops, and restaurants for Bible study, prayer, and encouragement.

Our hope comes from following the presence of the Lord through his Son Jesus. Step into the Jordan and follow him. Get out of the boat and follow him right onto the water of the unknown. Listen. Trust. Pay attention.

### **The Miracle of the Water**

There comes a time to move and to act. God commanded his people to do the impossible and step into the flooding waters: "Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan" (Joshua 3:15-16).

We cannot explain how a river stopped flowing, allowing thousands of people to walk across a dry riverbed. Where did the water go? How fast was the flow? We don't know these details. We do know the whole group crossed over like their forefathers at the Red Sea. When they finished crossing, the priests took the Ark out of the riverbed. The water started flowing again at flood stage. How did this work? It is part of the mystery of God. Sometimes we shouldn't press the way of miracles.

God did not stop working during biblical times. Today, he wants to do great things for the honor of his name and the good of his people. We don't know what all those things will be. But we do know Jesus wants to restore what is good, beautiful, and true. He's not giving up on the church, and he's not giving up on you. But we will need to be ready to go a new way—right through our own impossibilities.

### **Stones of Remembrance**

Before the priests brought the Ark out of the river, the Lord told Joshua to have representatives from the twelve tribes carry twelve stones out of the riverbed and set them up as a monument. The collected stones were to remind the people of God's intervention. Joshua said, "In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off. . . . These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever" (Joshua 4:6-7).

God loves to use symbols to trigger our memories. They remind us of greater realities. A cross reminds us of the sacrifice Jesus made for us. A Communion table helps us to recall God's presence among us. An open Bible reminds us of God's Word to us. Lighted candles remind us of the presence of God here in our midst and our call to be the light of the world. We need such symbols to remember God is among us, leading us on a way we have never been before.

The future of the church looked dubious after Peter and Paul were killed in Rome. Christianity seemed like a tough sell as an alternative to the Roman narrative. The future of the church looked doubtful when it got off track just prior to the Reformation. It looked doubtful in 1720 when decadence ruled before a Wesleyan revival came. It looked dubious in 1799 when Timothy Dwight was president of Yale until revival broke out—the Second Great Awakening.

Your life right now may be in a complicated place as you face a river at flood stage. Jesus is beckoning you to step into the water with him and trust. To be attentive:

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- ▶ Take some time to review the transitions you have experienced in your life. Did you resist those times of transition or embrace them?
- ▶ In what ways did you experience God's presence amid transition? Do you recognize any unhealthy attitudes within yourself as you went through those transitions?
- ▶ Consider the changes in your church or community now. How would you describe your attitude toward change? Are you excited about new possibilities for the gospel as a result of change? Are you frustrated by the greater leadership challenge that change requires?
- ▶ In what ways does this season of church feel like there is a huge obstacle in your way?
- ▶ What does it mean for your congregation to follow the Spirit and go a way you have never been before?
- ▶ Throughout the biblical narrative, God used symbols to help his people remember his faithfulness during times of uncertainty. What pictures or symbols help you remember God's past faithfulness as you face an uncertain future?

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