



October 31, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Genesis 12:1-3, Joshua 3:14-17
"Two Crossings"



As these families poured into the sanctuary with the pipes and drum this morning, you could almost feel the mist coming off the Highlands. The longing pierce of the bagpipes was only matched by the deafening silence that followed it; a pregnant pause that lights up your spirit. The posting of the Tartans, that mighty thrust echoed through this Sanctuary, resounded with the force of the ages. It is mesmerizing. It is beautiful. It is a powerful vision of history and family come alive. But is it mere sentimentality or is something more happening? Is all this pomp and pageantry just a good show? Or is the Living God speaking to us of great things, of the mighty acts of God.

When I see the Kirkin', it reminds me of a seminal event in the history of Israel – the crossing of the Jordan River. The passage we read this morning draws out the moment, building to a climax. Remember what brought them there. Hundreds of years before, God had made a promise to a man, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah. After a few generations, and many hardships, his descendants had grown to a few dozen, but famine threatened the family and they made their way to Egypt, where they would be enslaved for hundreds of years. And now the family of a few dozen had become a people. A people of 12 tribes (or clans if you will) was to be liberated, but it would take plagues, parting of a sea, and a visit from God on a mountain. But now all that heartache, all

that death, all that slavery, all that wandering, all that hunger, (and that God-blessed manna!) was about to end. The final barrier stood before them. They were on the brink of realizing the hope. An entire people stood on the banks of the swollen rivers of Jordan, brimming with 400 years of anticipation.

Then the procession begins. The Ark of the Covenant, bearer of the Word of God (like our Beadle), given at Sinai on two tablets, will lead the people across the raging river. The two tablets, whose message still rules the lives of most of the planet to this day, was carried by the Levite priests into the raging chaos of a swollen river. But the Ark beat back the chaos, God's law brings order, and so the soles of the feet of those priests, though in the middle of the river, were standing on dry ground. Next, those twelve tribes, the whole people of Israel, marched across, finally, into the Land of Promise.

When we witness the procession of Tartans it reminds us of another crossing made possible by our Living God. A crossing of a people seeking refuge from tyranny; a crossing of tribes, not across the Jordan, but the Atlantic. Instead of evading a pharaoh, they fled a king who sought to rule their earthly lives and a religious ruler who sought to rule their souls.

As we reflect on their journey here into a land far more prodigious than Palestine in its

fertile gifts, we can see the hand of God that still touches us today through their journey. Israel's crossing into Jordan marked the defeat of the false Canaanite god, Baal, and Scotland's crossing marked the birth of a new era for much of the planet.

Like Israel, Scotland was considered a second-class nation. In fact, one author referred to them as the "poorest nation on the earth." But once again, the crossing would be empowered by the Word of God. This time it was not carried by priests in a sacred Ark written on stones, but carried in the hearts and minds of common people, highlanders, and written in books, in accessible languages for all who could to read it.

Like many others, the Scots left Europe for freedom from the king and the Pope. But the Scottish came with uniquely-focused passions that bless us today. Some of these contributions are told in the book by Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything in It*.

Sir Winston Churchill himself once said that, "Of all the small nations of this earth, perhaps only the ancient Greeks surpass the Scots in their contribution to mankind." Though I could spend the rest of the next several weeks delineating the geo-political contributions of the Scots, what concerns us today is precisely how they have enabled us to draw closer to God, unique principles which still shape essential characteristics of what it means to be Presbyterian.

Scotland, in a uniquely-focused fashion, emphasized the right of the people as a whole

to rule, not divinely-appointed kings. This derives from John Knox's interpretation of scripture, which of course was shaped by John Calvin. "He preached that God ordained power into the people and that it was for the people to administer and enforce God's laws, not the monarchy." (Synopsis)

Since there was no longer a need for priests to intercede on our behalf to God (after all, Jesus performed the final sacrifice and intercedes on our behalf), it was up to the people together to read and interpret God's will and approach God in prayer. Furthermore, at Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on all flesh, not just those given special privilege. Everyone is given insight since God is present in all faithful hearts. In the Presbyterian Church today, we greatly value the voice of the people. The congregation, not the bishop, calls its pastor. The Session, not the priest, governs the church. All the congregation is given to reading of the Word of God – it is not an exclusive gift given to a select few.

It is easy to see how this has spilled over into society. It has founded and shaped essential elements of the idea of America. The Scots' inviolate the notion that the people choose their leaders as the disciples chose the 13th disciple still remains in America's election system, and our Presbyterian form of government. This core notion came more from Scotland than other European nations, who had long traditions of Kings.

These ideas completely changed the planet and influenced virtually every person's life in this country today. Because of them, there is a value we take for granted that was by no means a foregone conclusion.

The education of your children. The education of everyone's children. The education of children in Haiti. The education of children on the Upper East Side and the education of children in rural Kentucky. Wherever Presbyterians go, they build schools. Whether it was the first schools for African Americans in rural Alabama, a new school in Haiti built on a trash dump, or a school at Brick Church. All have the same goal. The valuing of every single mind and the developing it to its God-given capacity.

Often, great change begins with a simple, yet powerful notion. This Scottish notion, brought to this land of power, ordained to the people not divinely appointed kings or clerics. European education was limited to the wealthy, the connected and the religious. But the call to educate all people grew from the call to read the Bible. After all, one must be literate in order to read the Bible, so schools were built in every parish and literacy rates grew rapidly.

Neither Israel nor Scotland was by any means perfect. Sadly, both the Israelites in the Promised Land and some Scots in America perpetuated the deep sins of humanity such as slavery. Both left tyranny and oppression and in one way or another perpetuated it in the new land. And so as Presbyterians we need not only the history of the Scots, but also the broad contributions of the entire realm of God's people across every race and nation. We need the traditions and insights of Korean Christians, of African Americans, of Coptic Christians and our Roman Catholic friends. The rich insights of all the different ways people worship the Lord both enriches our vision of God and helps

prevent us from committing the sins of our ancestors.

But as a church who traces its history through this section of the Reformation, we give thanks for Scotland, like Israel, who was no nation of wealth or military might but tenacious in its principles.

So even though not all of us are Scottish (neither are we all Jewish), we all share the benefits of their courageous crossings, undergirded by the Word of God. Being Scottish is a state of mind born by hardship, devotion, and a hefty dose of hardheadedness! An indomitable belief in God's Word and the gift God gave us all to seek the Lord's will.

Our country today is rife with challenges. Children go to bed hungry. People work two jobs but cannot even keep up. Housing in many places is unaffordable. Mental health challenges have spiraled out of control. Elderly people are left home, alone, with no human connections. For many of these problems we simply have given up hope, feeling like our leaders have failed us. But if Israel and Scotland have taught us anything, we cannot simply sit on our hands, waiting for change. We the people have the power to make change, fundamental change.

The birth of Israel so long ago, over time, fundamentally changed the world. A nation based on laws of justice and equality, given by the one God, not the whims of power-hungry kings.

When those pipers and Tartans recess, let our hearts and minds go with them. Let us retrace the crossings endowed by God with

historical impact far beyond the moments
across Israel and the Atlantic. Amen.