

Joshua 24 Sermon

I struggled a bit with this sermon. The conversation in my Narrative Lectionary Facebook groups was all about how difficult this particular text is. Especially right after celebrating Columbus day last week and all the implications it brings up. The stories of the dark side of colonization and its impact on the natives... the people already living there. Even as a precocious child I remember hearing the story of Columbus discovering America and meeting the Indians who greeted them and wondering how somebody could discover a place if folks are already there when they get there. Doesn't "discover" mean "first one there?" Problematic at best. That's why a lot of folks don't celebrate Columbus Day. I don't. Oh I still take the day off... I'm not giving that up. In fact I think Columbus owes a week off each year for the devastation he brought to the so-called New World.

Today we read a bit of the story of a man who did something similar. He led his people to take over a land that their God "promised" them. And to get this land he had to take it from the people who lived there already ... because God promised it to THEM... the chosen... And if the natives resisted they were made out to be evil people who deserved to be wiped from the earth. Yeah... our 21st century brains should think that's kinda messed up. Because it is. But that's what we got in our sacred text. Lots of stories like these.

So let's deal with it for a minute. Okay?

[Pray with me.]

Last week we looked at the story about Moses receiving from God and giving to the Israelites the 10 Commandments. We talked about the people's need for rules since they had left Egypt and were now on their own. We talked about how the 10 commandments were not so much a set of specific rules meant to control ones behavior. That's what rules are really for – to control ones behavior. But the 10 commandments are not that. They are more like the recipe for a healthy community. The 10 Commandments are a set of guidelines to help us live together in community. That's what we talked about last week. I'm hoping you heard in my discussion of that story that more important than receiving this set of guidelines we call the 10 commandments is the fact that God chose them. The creator of all that is chose them out of all creation to be his own. Here we

have this group of people who have lived in captivity for much of the last 400 years, treated as nothing but chattel goods. Property. No more important than livestock. Nothing. God took a people that low and made them special. Even though they were until recently slaves. Even though they were currently homeless... wandering around the wilderness. Not lost as we might suppose. But not owning anything but what they carried. No base. No roots. No home. The message of the Exodus story is that God chose these lowly peoples and made them special. Promised them that they would be cared for. That they would always have what they needed. That their enemies would always be defeated. That they were special. The creator of all that is and ever was chose them as special. And because they were special God promised to deal with their greatest issue. God promised them a home. God promised them land.

And that's where our story picks up today. Actually, the book of Joshua is about the story of the Children of Israel acquiring the land. You know part of the story. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho... Jericho... Jericho. Remember? Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down. Remember that story?

Joshua took over leading the children of Israel after Moses. Moses was able to see the Promised Land but he wasn't able to get there with the people. Led them all that time... all the way out of Egypt. Put up with all of their murmuring and complaining. All of their ungratefulness. But he wasn't able to realize the ultimate goal... the acquisition of a place to call home. It was Joshua who took over and led them into the Promised Land. Moses got them to the door but it was Joshua who took them over the threshold.

We enter the story today with Joshua towards the end of his life. The Children of Israel had been in possession of the land for about 40 years or so, as long an amount of time as what they spent homeless and wandering around in the wilderness. And everything seemed fine. These formerly homeless people now had homes. They had land. And it was a wonderful land. Vast and fertile. Just what they needed. They probably didn't think about it much but they were clearly a blessed people. I mean 40 years in relative peace and comfort is plenty of time to forget the struggles of the wilderness. Plenty of time to forget that they were once homeless. And forget about the time before that when they were slaves. I mean sure they knew the stories. They had rituals and holy days and stuff they practiced in memory of those olden days. But nobody really thought much

about it anymore. In fact they were starting to forget. And it was starting to show in their behaviors.

The story says God had Joshua call everybody together... all the people spread out over the land they now called home. Then he called the leaders of all the tribes to him for a powwow. And he reminded them of who they were and from where they'd come. Took it all the way back. Back to before the covenant. And he walked them through each of the key points in their history. Times when something monumental happened that changed their path and fortunes. Joshua was reminding them that it was their God who was there in the middle of each of those moments. It was their God who faithfully rescued them. It was their God who got them through. And when you looked at it closely... they always got through. They always won... eventually. Further evidence that their God was with them.

“Chose ye this day whom ye shall serve.” That’s the hot line from this text. King James Version. “Chose ye this day...” You do have a choice, you know. I mean it would seem that the creator of all, the great and all powerful God could just make us obey. But no... it’s left up to us. You get to make the choice. But you gotta make it right now. And right now. And right now. You have to constantly make that choice. In every encounter. In every movement. In every decision. In everything you do in community, you have to make the choice. We are always making a choice. Most of them are automatic but we could at any time override the default response and make a different choice. And there are an infinite amount of choice options from which to choose. So right now Joshua is asking them to make a conscious choice. Who is it going to be?

“I’ve made a choice.” he said. “Me and my family are going to serve our God. Now what you gonna do?” What did Joshua see happening to his people? What did he see, here, now, at the end of his life, what was going on that made him speak like this? Because if you really think about it, Joshua was kind of a beast. Dude was a warrior. And he had lead his people to victory in many a battle. And these weren’t sit back in a bunker and push buttons kind of wars. This was get out there in front and fight hand to hand. Yes they had arrows and could rain a barrage of them down on their enemies from far away, but victory still required some hands on action. This was way more in your face fighting than what we think of today. Though the results were pretty much the same – a bunch of dead people.

And that's where I get queasy about this whole thing. All of the fighting and destruction of people who got in their way. I mean if you read this story of the Children of Israel you read a story about a people who TOOK what they wanted. This land that they claim they were promised... it had people living there already. And the Israelites claimed as their own And they took it by force. Even the miraculous victories that required no bloodshed were pretty gangster. Walls don't just fall on their own. And what about the people they fell on?

So yeah... while I can get happy about the victory of the Children of Israel. While I can rejoice at the evidence of God's providence. The proof that God cares for God's chosen people. And I can get excited knowing that as a follower of Jesus the Christ – a direct descendant of this very same lineage we are studying today – because I am a Christian, I am also one of God's chosen people. And that means that I also have access to that same kind of power. I also have that kind of protection. I also will have those kinds of victories. My enemies will also fall at my feet. All of that is well and good. But it is exactly because of my determination to follow Jesus that I can't be comfortable with that. Because in that model, every one of my victories means someone else is defeated. Every one of my ups means somebody else is down. While I'm celebrating my win someone else is mourning their loss.

Think about it. Somebody was already living on this land that God allegedly promised to the Israelites. Now what do you think they were going to do when you walk up and say, "Excuse me but you have to go. God gave me this land." You and your people have been living on that land for centuries and here come these funny looking people talking about it's their land now and you got to go. And then when you don't go, they sick their God on you and take it by force. And then they wonder why you don't like they're God? They wonder why you don't like them? Let me ask you, Center Church family, how would you feel if a folks showed up at your house and said, "God said this is my house. Get out." How would you feel? I know how I would feel. And I know what I would do. I would fight for mine.

So yes, I got problems with this story. I got problems with the way it is traditionally taught. I got problems with the way the church has used this story and others like it over the decades to exclude and control. I got problems with the way it forgets the real victims in this story... the people who lose in these battles. Worse than overlooking them and their stories, we make them

evil for not giving in. That's a tactic of the powerful. They make anyone that disagrees with them... evil. That way it's almost justified to treat them wrong. How convenient.

Nahhh.... nahhh.... I'm not rolling with that. That is way too troubling for my soul. And it goes against everything I believe about God.

But it's here. And the fact is, the story was told in this way because that's exactly what they believed. God chose them over everybody else so it was expected and acceptable for God to destroy everybody that got in the way of them getting what they want. I'm sorry but that's messed up. Growing up in church I always used to hear the old saints say, "God is not a respecter of persons." But that's exactly what this God is. If it's okay to destroy you to give something to my favorites then I am a respecter of persons. The very fact that I have a favorite and treat them as such means I am a respecter of persons. So we say this stuff and the reason we are saying it contradicts what it says.

I think that's a bit of what is happening with Joshua here too. See, the point of reminding the people of all the struggles they made it through was to remind them that the reason they made it through was a direct result of their devotion to their God and the keeping of God's law. He was reminding them that their comfort was the direct result of the keeping of the covenant. God kept their part. And if we want God to keep on keeping her part then we need to keep ours too. God will get us through the messes we find ourselves in – if we keep God's law. That's the agreement. That's the covenant. Take it or leave it. But you have to choose. And you have to choose now.

Joshua saw that the people of Israel were getting comfortable and in their comfort they were getting lax in keeping their part of the covenant. They were starting to forget their God. Worse, they were starting to worship other Gods. The gods of the people whose land they took. And that was a problem. Because it meant they would soon lose their protection. They could soon lose their freedom. So Joshua called together the leaders to remind them.

Let me cut to the chase here. Joshua was right. It is very easy to get complacent. See, keeping our side of the covenant is hard work. It requires diligence and almost constant attention. There are times when it happens automatically but if you aren't on top of it... you will slip. So you can't relax. You have to be intentional about it. Because doing what you have to do... being who you

have to be to keep our side of the covenant is not natural. It's not our default way of being. So you gotta stay on top of it. You gotta keep trying. And because it is such a commitment, you gotta go at it whole hog. You can't dip your toe in and think you're swimming. Keeping our side of the covenant is a full time job. There's no half stepping. You either all in or all out. 99 and a half won't do. Because keeping God's law requires all of you.

Yes, Joshua was right about that. But where I think he's off is the criminalization and demonization of those who don't keep the commandments. Those who don't serve the same God. Isn't it bad enough that they are lost? And isn't pushing them away doing the exact opposite of what God's law demands?

Because remember, God's law is to love. The covenant is that God loves us and we have to love God back. And the way we love God back is by loving God's creation. ALL creation. Even the parts that aren't like us. Even the parts that don't agree with us. Even the parts that don't think like we think. Even those who directly oppose us. That's the covenant. And I'll be the first to admit, sometimes it's hard to keep. Folks got a way of making you not want to love them. But if we want God's love... if we want to keep our side of the covenant... if we really want to be God's chosen people, then we have to choose. Will it be love? Or will it be hate... selfishness... jealousy... lust... gluttony... greed. Will it be life? Or will it be death. Will you serve the God who is love or the god who is all those things that prevent love? It's your choice. Which way will you go? Well... I don't know about you, but as for me and my house... we're going to serve the lord. I chose love. What about you?

Amen.