

What's it gonna be?

Joshua 24:1-15 10/18/26

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Today we fall back to the Narrative Lectionary which is a 4 year cycle of Bible readings that gets us through the entire sweep of the biblical story from Creation through the early church. And today we land in the last chapter of Joshua where Joshua is giving a challenge to the people of Israel as they settle into the land of Canaan that's becoming their new home after over 40 years wandering in the desert without a place to call home. Hey kids, do you like to sleep in a tent? Can you imagine doing that for over 40 years? And their tents would've just had a dirt floor and wouldn't have had screens over the windows to keep bugs out!

Joshua has all the people assemble at Shechem. Joshua leads them in reciting Heilsgeschichte, (if you know, you know—if you had Biblical Literature Class at Hesston College, you know!) It's a German word meaning history of God's saving works. It begins with a covenant established with Abraham and Sarah. Then Isaac, then Jacob, and Jacob's family are hit by famine and they go down to Egypt to get grain from the governor who happens to be Joseph. Then Moses, and Aaron, and then Joshua talking for God in 1st person continues, "I plagued Egypt and the Pharaoh until he 'Let my People Go' and I brought you out of there and the Egyptians chased you with horses and chariots to the Red Sea. You cried out for help and I delivered you by parting the sea and bringing down the sea on those who tried to pursue you. For 40 years I sustained you while you wandered in the desert without a home".

"But I have kept my covenant and I have now given you this land on the other side of the Euphrates just as promised. The Amorites, the Moabites, Jericho, I gave them into your hands. The Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gargishites, Hivites, and Jebushites, all driven out by the hornet and then you mopped them up with the sword. And now, here you are. I have given you land on which you hadn't toiled and cities that you hadn't built. You've settled in them and are enjoying produce from vineyards and olive groves you didn't plant!"

So now, Joshua says, now it's time to decide. Your grandparents have seen God's deliverance, God's sustenance, God's providence. Your parents have seen it, and now you have seen it. Choose this day (V15) whom you will serve. Will you choose to serve the gods of other nations, or to serve the LORD (YHWH)? What's it gonna be? Do you want to stay living in a tent? Or do you want to settle into a house?

Well, that's simple enough. We have the same choice. We too look back through the stories of God's salvation we've learned and are learning in Sunday School, stories of how God intervenes to keep the story alive and going when all seems hopeless—think Sarah unable to conceive. Jacob, spared from the wrath of Esau. Baby Moses floating in a basket on the Nile. Hey kids, does he get eaten by an alligator? No! What happens? He is discovered by none other than Pharaoh's daughter! "Oh, look at the cute little baby Israelite boy..can we keep him?". God intervenes to keep the story

going...and Moses grows up in Pharaoh's palace with his mom as his care-taker! Just when the story seems to have ground to a halt, God nudges things along to get it going again. Water gushing from a rock. Manna from heaven. The promised land, given to them. And later, a long Exile, and return. Roman rule. And all that cold wintry intertestamental time where God seems to have gone silent and hope of God's intervention seems dead and gone..God is preparing to do a new thing--and of course we'll soon be picking up that part of the story in Advent!

..Where God literally becomes human and shows us people how to live, how to love. Even to the point of death. And resurrection! God sustains the disciples and the early church, provides them with the Holy Spirit, walks along with them through persecution, until the eventual rise--OR FALL to state political power in Constantinople and Rome and the rise of the universal catholic church. Some among us may connect our origin stories to this movement.

And the church kept growing and spreading, through the Protestant reformation of the church all the way to today. And some among us may have our historical ancestral connection to this movement and one of the mainline protestant denominations.

And too, God provides the gritty faith of the Anabaptists and Mennonites who took a different path and followed their own convictions instead of what their government told them to do and endured horrific persecution by the state AND the established Church and they became a people in search for a home in Europe, Poland, the Ukraine, and on to the Americas and PA and Ohio and Canada and Paraguay and Goessel and Newton and Halstead and Moundridge. And many other places. And some of us can pick up our own family stories of our great great grandparents and their struggles and migration and immigrant housing and homesteading and building the very church in which we're standing or sitting or sleeping in today. That last reference was regarding one of the new infants we have in our midst, of course. None of you adults ever fall asleep in church.

Regardless of which pathway brought you here--and even if you didn't grow up in with Christianity or church at all--we can all look back at our own family history and the stories we've been told of the twists and turns of faithfulness and unfaithfulness and good choices and bad choices and even good luck or just plain bad luck and perhaps see God giving the story of our family a little nudge when our family story seems to have hit a snag, or a hopeless dead end.

Remembering in this way helps us realize that none of us are just individuals on a journey, but a part of a movement of the people of God standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before us. And just as they had to choose faith over fear, YHWH over other Gods, so do we.

Will we keep it going by taking the baton or the handoff of the torch from our parents and attribute the crises and deliverance and the longing for home and the odyssey of

our individual lives to the same God who called Abraham and Sarah and shows them a sky full of stars and says “I will make you a great people”. Will the story stop with us? Or will you be part of this story?

We could probably end the sermon here on this upshot question. There’s plenty to chew on already.

In some ways, if you are here today in church it could be argued that you’ve already made or are making that choice—like Joshua, you declare like our passage for today ends with “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD”.

But on the other hand for us relatively wealthy and prosperous and settled Christians in North America to read this and have this the only conclusion and final take-away of the end of the book of Joshua is a problem. And that is the problem of violence, conquest, and even genocide that accompanied the Israelite people to this point in the book of Joshua.

Not just that the children of Israel reduced the indigenous people of the land of Canaan to “the other”. Theologian and pastor Arthur Wright says, “The entire book of Joshua seems to glorify violence in the name of religion, even imagining war and conquest as holy actions. Worse still, this passage and Joshua’s speech imagines that God is the one who commits these atrocious acts of violence and genocide”!

I don’t know about you, but at this time when Christian Nationalistic ideals seem to be at an all time high, we had better not dismiss or minimize or explain away this violence. And I happen to know the Hwy 15 Sunday school class has just been studying the book of Joshua, and they’d never let me off the hook without dealing with this question and problem of OT violence. And at our Midweek Bible Study this past Wednesday where we gathered around this passage—it was the problem of violence that generated the most discussion!

There is much that can be said about violence in the OT and especially the book of Joshua. But this is a sermon, not a lecture, and I’m a preacher, not a professor. So I will not try to say all that has been said or thought about or written to address this problem. But here are some thoughts and questions to ponder along the way in your own journey of trying to come to terms with OT violence in light of how God is revealed in the NT in the life and words of Jesus.

1. The irony: The beginning of the story of God calling and establishing a people is a call to Abraham and Sarah and his descendants in Gen 12:3 is “through you all the families of the earth will be,” what? Destroyed? Conquered? Dominated? NO! “BLESSED!!!” The irony is that the Israelite people became like their Egyptian captors that God had liberated them from!
2. It is impossible to reconcile this promise to Abraham with the book of Joshua that views violence as faithfulness to God’s promises. And impossible to reconcile this with the life and words of Jesus. Maybe it is best to just be honest about this and not try to ignore it or excuse it.

3. Perhaps it's better to accept some of the incongruence of scripture rather than working too hard to try to harmonize it all. Accepting the Bible in this way actually can enhance the value of Scripture without feeling like we have to defend it. Those that collected and assembled these ancient documents simply placed them together and let them stand alongside each other—rather than changing them to make them more consistent in their messaging. They resisted that urge to harmonize them.
4. And that leaves us bumping into these conflicting messages. What do we do with that? This is an invitation to wrestle with it in prayer and go straight to the source of these inspired writings. “God, you are going to have to help me with this. What do you have for me, and for my people, here in these words in light of what I know about you from the life of your Son?”
5. What if we look at these words and stories of conquest not as a model, or even just as history remembered, but as a mirror? A mirror that reminds us of our human propensity toward violence. Maybe not as much individual violence, but systemic, corporate, and nationalistic forms. Greed. And our tendency to tell the story of God’s faithfulness in ways that justify our oppressive actions and desire for empire, even attributing the suffering of other nations to God’s way of blessing us who are the “faithful” ones?

Sadly, we who are of white European descent have far too easily crossed out Israel in the book of Joshua and written in the United States and declared North America as our promised land, feeling not only justified but even as if we were doing God’s work by first “othering” and then eradicating the people and culture of the people native to this land—just like Israel did in the book of Joshua. We even found support for our slave trade, decimating African cultures we didn’t understand, and used black and brown bodies as the backbone of our industry.

Even now, there are plenty of words from people in high positions of power that keep this mentality alive, some subtle and some not so subtle. Rallying cries that we “take back our nation for God” often ring with the message that we should reject any telling of our history of colonialism, genocide, racism, and oppressive capitalism if it does anything but make our hearts swell with national pride and patriotism.

See, without acknowledging this new covenant that we have in Jesus who’s life and words and death and resurrection teach us love and kindness and gentleness and justice and sharing of resources and eternal living, we may never come to terms with our propensity toward violence, toward conquest, toward imperialistic ways of being in the world.

Choose this day whom you will serve! Our text DOES demand a choice. It presents us a choice between god of conquest and prosperity at all costs—and God who intended and intends divine blessings and a place to call home to every single person and tribe the entire world over. Take your time, Joshua seems to say. Don’t answer too quickly. Think about it long and hard.

Young people—as you figure out a career path—Which God will you choose? Middle-aged people—however you want to categorize yourselves—When you take stock of your life and loyalties, which God have you been choosing? Retired or aging folks, which God are you choosing? A God who demands efficiency at all costs? Or a God of slow compassion and love? What's it gonna be? May our choice become ever more clear as we live, breathe, vote, and as we go about our daily living. And may the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth.