

We are six weeks into our journey with the Narrative Lectionary. Beginning on September 9th our scripture selections for Sunday morning have been guided by this schedule of readings developed by two professors from Luther Seminary in partnership with congregations across North America. It is a four-year cycle and each year the schedule follows the sweep of the biblical story from Creation through the early Christian church. Our text this morning comes from the last chapter of the book of Joshua which begins right after the death of Moses. Joshua, who had been named Moses' successor as the leader of the people, completes their journey to the promised land.

The book of Joshua chronicles battle after battle of Joshua's people conquering the land that God has promised them. I know many clergy, including myself, who are not fans of this book. The whole premise of the book is that God wants the Hebrew people to control the land and it is the desire of God for them slaughter all the men, women, children, and livestock currently living on that land in order to make that happen. What we know from modern archeological studies, is that most of the battles described in Joshua likely didn't happen. Or if they did happen, the text greatly exaggerates the devastation that occurred. The biblical text itself contradicts the total desolation described. Instead, most scholars have come to the conclusion that most of the book of Joshua is written as an etiology - an attempt by authors to explain how the Israelites got control of what they considered the Promised Land. The simple explanation was that God made it happen.¹ It is like a movie that says it is inspired by true events but the details are mostly fiction. The message of this book is a theological one, not a historical one. The multiple authors of the book of Joshua used hyperbole and story telling to communicate a theology to the people reading and hearing the text.

I think this context around the book of Joshua is extremely import for us to understand. This knowledge allows us to focus on the message rather than the details and to rightly question the notion of a God who would bless genocide. As I see it, there

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

are two major Truths for us to take away from this book. First, that we must place our trust and give our devotion to the ultimate God and let go of all the other things we worship in God's place. We discussed this last week when our text was the Ten Commandments and if you missed it, you can access the sermon on the church website or watch the video on Facebook. Joshua is calling on the people to make a choice. To make a commitment. This is a covenant that their ancestors had with God for generations. The people of Israel had a horrible track record of keeping that covenant. For example, after being delivered from slavery in Egypt, while Moses was up on the mountain talking to God, the people decide to create a calf made of gold and begin to worship it. Joshua knows that the people's loyalty to their God is fickle and so they are asked again to re-commit to this covenant relationship with their God. I had originally planned to revisit this theme again this morning, which you can see from the hymns I chose. But the Holy Spirit nudged me in a different direction.

Which leads me to the second truth I see in this book. And that is that our accomplishments are not our own. More than half of the verses of our scripture this morning is an account of Joshua reminding the people of all the things that their God has done for them. The gift of offspring to Abraham and the multitude of descendants, deliverance from captivity in Egypt, and the gift of land and military success. Now, my personal theology does not fully agree with what is described by Joshua. For one, we know that all the details aren't historically factual. But I also know that God is at work in the world in ways I don't fully comprehend.

Earlier in the Joshua story, Joshua has a vision of a soldier. He asks the soldier "are you for us or for our enemies?" (Joshua 5:13) The soldier replies that he is for neither. But instead he is a commander of the army of the Lord. Now, I'm not a fan of conflating military imagery with God, but it was the language of the time. What struck me about this is the reminder that God doesn't take sides. God is for bringing about the kin-dom of heaven to earth.

It is important for all of us humans to remember that we are part of something bigger. There is a running joke in preaching circles that what you say isn't always what

people hear. It is a common experience for preachers to have someone come up to them and relay how much a particular sentence resonated. And yet when they share that sentence, it isn't even close to something that was in the sermon. Most preachers see that as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that we are not ultimately in control of the message our people hear. But many times, what they hear is exactly what they needed to hear, even if we didn't speak the words. God works in mysterious ways. We preachers would be foolish to think that the messages we deliver from the pulpit are purely products of our own genius.

Sometimes God is at work when we feel a nudge to do or say something we hadn't considered doing or saying before. I felt such a nudge one Tuesday morning while in seminary. Tuesdays were the days that we had chapel services. They weren't required but I really enjoyed going most weeks. This particular week I was feeling really overwhelmed with how much reading and paper-writing I had to do that week and was planning to skip chapel. But something told me I needed to go. When I arrived, I noticed a friend of mine sitting alone in one of the pews, so I sat next to her. It turned out that she was giving a sort of testimony during the service and was extremely nervous. She told me after the service that my presence next to her that morning was such a gift and gave her courage.

I invite you now to take a minute and reflect on the ways that God might be at work in your life. If you look back over the events of your life, where do you see God showing up? What about the life of our congregation?

Let us pray...

Holy God, we thank you for the many ways you are at work in the world. Open our awareness to your calls for us so that we might, in the words of the prophet Micah, seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Amen.