

That Sounds Familiar: The Walls Came Tumbling Down

Joshua 6:1-21

August 23, 2015

Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in. The Lord said to Joshua, 'See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. When they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and all the people shall charge straight ahead.' So Joshua son of Nun summoned the priests and said to them, 'Take up the ark of the covenant, and have seven priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark of the Lord.' To the people he said, 'Go forward and march around the city; have the armed men pass on before the ark of the Lord.'

As Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the Lord went forward, blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the Lord following them. And the armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets; the rearguard came after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually. To the people Joshua gave this command: 'You shall not shout or let your voice be heard, nor shall you utter a word, until the day I tell you to shout. Then you shall shout.' So the ark of the Lord went around the city, circling it once; and they came into the camp, and spent the night in the camp.

Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord passed on, blowing the trumpets continually. The armed men went before them, and the rearguard came after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually. On the second day they marched around the city once and then returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, 'Shout! For the Lord has given you the city. The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers we sent. As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord.' So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the

people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

+++

“Thanks be to God”

Do you mean that?

We chose this scripture as a part of our summer series because the story is one that many of us probably heard when we were children. We may remember a picture of Joshua’s army looked like marching seven times around the city of Jericho on that seventh day; we can almost imagine the sound of the trumpets blowing and the people shouting; and the walls came tumbling down.

But our memories edit out the last part of the story. And for good reason...

“Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city...” (and, in case you haven’t quite grasped who “all in the city” are, the verse keeps going) “...both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

There is a lot I don’t understand about the Bible.

Maybe that sounds funny to you. I have been to seminary. I am this close to receiving a Doctorate degree. I spend hours every week reading the Bible and reading about the Bible.

But there are still so many things I just don’t understand.

Most scholars you can read on this passage talk about the ways we have to interpret what is really going on here. When we read the Bible as an account of history, they say, we need to remember that the way the Bible tells its history is different than the way CNN reports the news.

The book of Joshua was probably written during the time that the Israelites were in exile – that is, when the people whom God had led into

the Promised Land were kicked out of their homes by an occupying force. Scholars think that it was then, generations and generations after the time they first crossed the River Jordan and entered the Promised Land, that the book of Joshua was written in the form that we have it today. And so you can imagine that for a people who had tasted what it was like to have a place – and then been kicked back out of that place to wander again in foreign lands – a story like the battle of Jericho would have some serious appeal.

In essence, what we find in this story, most biblical scholars say, is an account of history seen through the lenses of hope and memory. A story impacted by what the Israelites hoped God would do again, and a story that is more focused on the memory of God's presence and promises fulfilled than on a literal accounting of the facts.¹

And maybe that makes the death and destruction in this story a little easier to understand – but it still makes me uncomfortable.

Here's the thing I don't get – why would God authorize an action that flatly denies the essence of the 10 Commandments – which are precisely the things that Joshua and his army are carrying around the city of Jericho in the Ark of the Covenant? As Jesus famously said, the essence of the 10 Commandments is a love of God and neighbor.

How does “devoting yourself to the destruction of every man, woman, child, oxen, sheep, and donkey” demonstrate a love for God or neighbor? Even if some within the walls of Jericho deserved the punishment of God for their sin – this passage doesn't talk about sparing the innocent! So how do we reconcile this image of God with that of the picture we see of God who is like a patient father who welcomes the Prodigal son home?

The easy way through this dilemma is to say that the God of the Old Testament is full of wrath, but the God of the New Testament is full of love. But before you put too much stock in that argument, flip to the end of your Bible and read the book of Revelation. Or the book of Acts.

¹ This is my composite of a number of scholars I have read on this subject: Walter Breuggemann, Jerome Creach, Pat Miller, Christine Yoder, etc...

There are passages where God affects death and destruction in both the Old and the New Testaments.

If I sound a little worked up over this, I am.

And, frankly, it is not because I have trouble with the Bible.

It is because I worry about how God's people interpret Scriptures like Joshua at the battle of Jericho to justify their behavior.

It's a dangerous thing to believe that your act of conquest is done with God's blessing and with God's help.

Rwanda

Attacks on Israel

Attacks on Palestine

Al-Queda

ISIS

They might not all be quoting Joshua chapter 6, but it is the same argument:

God authorizes the actions we take.

We have a divine right to the life or the land.

I do not understand it.

And it scares me.

It is our instinct, I think, to fall prey to the temptation of debating whose side God is on. Who has the right to the land? Is it Israel or is it Palestine? Which nation is responsible for standing up to acts of terror, and how will God be on that nation's side?

What I think we miss when we ask these kinds of questions is an awareness of how God calls us to act toward one another.

As people of faith – we have a responsibility to work out our lives and our decisions by the light of Jesus Christ and through the witness to Jesus Christ in the authority of Scripture. John Calvin called Scripture “the spectacles that help us interpret what we see in God's world.”

And I guess what I struggle with in today's scripture, more than deciding or celebrating whose side God is on, is what the Bible says about violence. Is violence inevitable as the means by which human

beings relate to one another when in conflict? Is violence tolerated, or, even, condoned by God?

It strikes me that violence has become such a normal part of our life and our world that we don't even notice it anymore. I have an eight-year old. I don't know the last time you watched a movie or a video game with an eight-year old, but when you do, pay attention to the amount of violence you see.

Late this week – after I thought I had finished my sermon – I had a conversation with a friend in the church about the decision in the trial of Officer Kerrick taking the life of Jonathan Ferrell. As our city navigates the impact of the jury's decision (and of the tragedy that led to the trial in the first place), there will be plenty to consider in terms of what role race played in the events of September, 2013. But as my friend pointed out, another question we might ask is what does it say about our culture that the reason Jonathan Ferrell lost his life is because Officer Kerrick believed an unarmed man was reaching for his firearm?

Now, that's not a question about who is to blame in the tragedy, and it's not a question about the Second Amendment. It is a question that helps to illustrate a pervasive culture of violence that we so often accept as standard.

Is it standard? Does the voice of God through Scripture call us to a different path?

I started this sermon by admitting that there is a lot I don't know about the Bible. That will always be the case. What makes the Bible so rich – and wonderful – and, occasionally, confusing – is that we, as the people of God, have to do the hard work of **interpreting** what God means through this book. And while we might think it would be nice if we could just open the page and point to a chapter and verse, the blessing of the Scripture comes when we read these stories in light of the whole book and in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – whom God sent to us because words were never quite enough.

As I have let the Scripture work on me this week, I still do not know how to fully reconcile God's command for Joshua and his army to lay waste to

the city of Jericho, but I do not believe that violence is the point of this story.

This is a story about God's people coming into a land that was filled with idols. Filled with ideas and material possessions that people worshipped as if **they** were the true gods.

And if I understand the text, I think the Battle of Jericho is about how fiercely God wants to protect his people from being tempted by the things we might be prone to worship. And when it comes to worship, the God we serve is jealous.

There isn't room for two gods. Only one.

Martin Luther said that God is the one thing for which our hearts yearn.

Paul Tillich described God as our "ultimate concern."

Later in the book, the battle-worn leader, Joshua, calls the people together in the land that was now their home and confronts them so that they will not forget: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Joshua said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

What is it for us?

For what does your heart yearn?

If you looked at your life, what would you describe as your "ultimate concern?"

If you looked at our culture – how would you answer the same question?

Is it success at the expense of balance?

Is it comfort at the expense of isolating ourselves from our neighbors?

Is it safety at the expense of making violence a part of our norm?

And are any of those things more important than God?

+++

Prayer:

You alone. You alone, Lord.

So blow the trumpet - topple the wall - bring us into right relationship with you.

We yield to what we do not understand and we pray that you would help us thank you for the grace you offer by loving one another in the manner that demonstrates your love.