

Promises, Promises

I'm pretty sure this is the first sermon I've ever preached from the Book of Joshua and it may be the only one you hear from me for quite a while. I'm not the only preacher to avoid the sixth book of the Old Testament. The Revised Common Lectionary features only three readings from the book in its whole three-year cycle and the variations on the lectionary used by Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans cut that down to two readings in three years. Everybody uses some portion of Joshua's farewell address, as we are doing this morning, as well as the story in chapter five about the first Passover celebrated in the Promised Land. The Revised Common Lectionary adds the story from chapter three about the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River but, let's face it, that story pales in comparison with the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, so it's no big deal to leave it out. We're likely to remember from our children's Bible story days the tale of the fall of Jericho in chapter six. After all, Joshua is most famous for the fact that he "fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho." And we may even remember the prelude to that story – the one about the two spies and Rahab who hid them and lowered them from her roof to safety. That's a story often told to children, too, although generally Rahab's profession is glossed over for the younger set. But neither of those stories is in the lectionary.

So, why this general disdain for the Book of Joshua by preachers and those who make plans for them? Well, part of the answer is that a good deal of the book is as dry as the dusty terrain it describes. Most of the second half of the book, from chapter 12 through chapter 21, is comprised of lists – a list of all the kings defeated by Israel in battle and then an interminable list of the cities and villages divvied up between the twelve tribes. It's great source material for archaeologists and historians but pretty tedious for the general reader. And if there's a preacher out there who can make those passages sing, I've yet to hear him or her.

The real problem with preaching out of the Book of Joshua, though, is quite the reverse. It is, perhaps, too exciting and for reasons that don't make a good sermon. The first half of the book describes in sometimes gory detail the conquest by the Hebrews of the Promised Land. It's a book that seems slanted, in modern eyes, for the enjoyment of teenage boys. It's sort of like the movie "G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra" in Biblical times, a movie hailed as "awesome" by one fourteen-year old critic of my acquaintance because it had "lots of things blowing up and smokin' babes." Indeed, Joshua has lots of battles, the city of Jericho blowing up (or, rather, falling down), and Rahab, one of the original smokin' babes. If you're a fan of action/adventure movies, then the Book of Joshua is for you. But the unfortunate corollary is that it also features the Children of Israel, under God's direction and with God's assistance, committing genocide.

It is called "the ban" or "herem" and it is invoked by Joshua in his directions to the fighting men of Israel just prior to the fall of Jericho: "The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction." It is a concept first introduced by Moses in Deuteronomy 7:2, apparently under the direction of God. It rings horribly in our ears and it is only with a great effort that we can even begin to make sense of the existence of this concept within the salvation history of our Scriptures. It does show, as Jesuit scholar Lawrence Boadt points out in his widely used Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction, that "Israel put all its trust in God alone during the war and sought nothing for itself," other than, of course, the land. And, as Boadt also points out, this brutal method of war was claimed by other cultures in ancient times. Perhaps most important to our peace of mind is the realization, upon a careful reading of the book and its sequels, that imposition of the ban could have only rarely if ever actually been carried out, as the Israelites are

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forever dealing with the remnants of the people they have supposedly utterly destroyed. It is more likely that writing about the ban in the Scriptures is the sort of hyperbole that ancient writers of many cultures often used to promote the idea that their tribe and their god or gods were paramount, to be respected and feared by all. Still, it is hard to understand how to make authentic and helpful use of these Scriptures today.

So, what helpful lessons can we take from the Book of Joshua as a whole, if any? Certainly there is the repeated idea that by being faithful to their covenant with God, the Chosen People will eventually win out against all odds. They will do this not through their own strength alone but with the active help of God, the One who has led them out of captivity in Egypt. Through their faithfulness, Israel will help to demonstrate to their neighbors that Yahweh, the God who reveals Godself through history, has a universal rule, that Yahweh is the God of All. Demonstrating the preeminence of Yahweh was important because neither the Children of Israel in Joshua's time nor their neighbors were monotheistic in the way that we understand the word. They took it for granted that there were many gods who acted in competition with each other. It is an idea that continues to influence modern society, whether we perceive it or not. I will return to this idea later.

But let's turn now to our passage for the morning in its specifics. It is set near the end of the life of Joshua, son of Nun, the successor of Moses as the leader of Israel and their general in the conquest of Canaan. The passage is best known for Joshua's famous declaration, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." In structure, it is a kind of covenant renewal liturgy, a service of the renewal of vows, if you will. It actually came back to my mind earlier this summer, some time before I knew I was going to preach from it, when my friend Don Labourr asked me to officiate at a ceremony of the renewal of wedding vows between him and his wife as they celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary. As we discussed what they wanted in the ceremony, Don and Lil asked me, "Is there a Biblical precedent for the renewal of vows?" After some reflection and research, I responded that a service specifically for the renewal of wedding vows was quite modern as far as I could tell. There is a long history in Christian wedding services of a call for those married persons present to reflect on and confirm their own vows, as some of you heard yesterday afternoon as we celebrated the wedding of Ellynk and Randy Koffler. Even older is the tradition of the renewal of baptismal vows by all present or by sponsors or godparents as new members of the congregation are baptized. But the concept of a renewal of vows before God or the renewal of the people's covenant with God is solidly based in Scripture as we find God calling on God's people again and again to reaffirm the covenant between them, so faithfully kept by God and so often breached by God's people.

We're not, after all, very good at keeping covenant, we humans. The story of the Bible is a story of humanity turning away from God again and again and then crying out to God when fallenness leads to its inevitable consequences. If we look just at the story of Joshua and its immediate aftermath, we can see that Joshua was only in a position to be the leader of Israel into the Promised Land because the people as a whole had resisted God's leadership through Moses some forty years earlier and because Moses himself fell prey to the temptations of his own temper and frustration. In the book following Joshua, the Book of Judges, we find that the Israelites fail to follow God's command about ridding the land of its previous inhabitants and are soon merrily worshipping the gods of those people, just as they had sworn to Joshua that they would not do.

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We don't have to look to the Bible for proof of human infidelity to promises, either. Some of you may have recognized the title of my sermon as the title of a Broadway musical from the Sixties, an adaptation of Billy Wilder's film, "The Apartment." The musical featured tunes by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, including "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," which was a hit for Dionne Warwick before the show opened. "Promises, Promises," like the movie before it, concerns the making and breaking of promises – wedding vows, assignments, career advancement, all kinds of promises. More recently, breaking of another kind of promise has been a cause célèbre in the sports pages. Successful college coaches routinely find ways out of supposedly iron-clad contracts to jump to larger schools with bigger budgets and more lucrative contracts. It's happened at both my alma mater, Rice University, and at Connie's, the University of Louisville. Connie and I have recently been using our Netflix subscription to watch "The Sopranos," which we did not see in its original run on HBO. This week, we watched an episode in which the soccer coach at the high school attended by Meadow Soprano jumped his contract, with a predictable response from Meadow's dad, Don Tony. I know the human propensity to break promises from my own life. Early in our relationship, I told Connie that I wasn't going to make many promises to her, because I didn't want to break them. I'd grown up in a household where my dad routinely made promises to me or my mom, which he would then break due to the exigencies of work or fatigue – understandable but hurtful to a young boy. So, I told Connie that I only promised that our lives together would never be boring, a promise I think I've kept in good faith.

Joshua apparently understood the ease with which people forget their promises and why they were made. In the opening section of this farewell address, which the lectionary skips over, he reminds the Children of Israel of just why it is that they should be faithful to Yahweh – it is because Yahweh has been faithful to them. He begins his recital with the story of God's call to Abraham. The father of their ancestors, Joshua reminds them, had lived in the land across the Euphrates, where other gods were worshipped. He alone of his family had accepted the call of Yahweh to trust and follow God to a new land. Joshua reminds the people of God's faithfulness to Abraham and Isaac and Esau and Jacob, of God's care for the captives of Egypt and how God had led them to freedom, of how God had been responsible for their victories over the people who had inhabited the land promised to them. In reminding the people of this history, Joshua points out the choice that is now open to them. They served Pharaoh unwillingly; now they can willingly serve God who saved them or they can turn their backs on Yahweh and serve the gods of the land they have entered, which would have been the standard practice of the time, or even return to the gods that Abraham left behind.

It is a real choice that Joshua offers them. He understands that it's not always easy to serve Yahweh. Our New Revised Standard Version Bibles translate the opening of verse 15 as "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord," but other versions capture a stronger sense from the Hebrew of the passage. The Message says, "If you decide that it's a bad thing to worship God..."; the old King James Authorized Version is even more blunt – "if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD..." Again, the lectionary ends the reading with verse 18 but in verse 19 and following, Joshua repeats this idea that the people may not really want to deal with Yahweh. "But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve

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foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!”” Some commentators have suggested that this is a rhetorical device on Joshua’s part, a sort of reverse psychology sales technique. I’m reminded of recordings from early in the career of Bruce Springsteen, when while leading a frenzied crowd through an encore of favorites, he would suddenly stop and say, “I’m so tired... I think we’d better stop.” The crowd would roar, “No, No! More!” Springsteen would say, “Are you sure? You need to get home, you know. If you don’t get home, you’re going to miss that ‘Cannon’ rerun. You’re going to miss ‘Hawaiian Eye!’” And the crowd would scream and shout until Springsteen would say, with studied nonchalance, “Well, OK then,” and burst back into the encore.

But I think this is more than Joshua’s rhetorical flourish. I think the old man is looking into the future of the people and seeing all the times that they will surely fall away, just as they have in the past; when they murmured their way through the wilderness, complaining at every step, when they refused to enter the Promised Land when they first had opportunity because they were afraid; when, barely out of sight of Egypt, they couldn’t wait for Moses to return from his mountain top encounter with God, but convinced Aaron to make them an idol of a Golden Calf to worship instead of the mysterious Yahweh. In many ways, Joshua’s repeated challenge to Israel is a foreshadowing of the lectionary Gospel passage for this morning. The sixth chapter of John contains a long teaching by Jesus around himself as the Bread of Life and his challenge to those in the synagogue at Capernaum that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ...Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”” Like Joshua, Jesus was giving those to whom he spoke a real choice. And, like the Israelites with Joshua, there was a faithful response: “Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”” Of course, just as the Children of Israel promised fidelity and then failed, so would Peter and the disciples promise to stand by Jesus, only to run when the soldiers came. As I said, we humans are really not very good at keeping our promises.

We have a real choice now, as well. Who do we serve? As Bob Dylan sang a few years ago, when he was trying to overtly disclose his new-found faith, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody.” We may think that our modern concept of monotheism is more rigorous than that of Joshua’s time but the fact is that our society still bows before many gods. Dan Bollerud, a Lutheran pastor in Alaska, writes, “We all have a closet full of gods we serve. We might not want to admit it, but they are there, in secret, in the dark. Take stock some time on where you spend your money and where you spend your time, and most importantly, where you spend your mental time. Money and time may indicate dedication, but mental time... that is where you will find your gods.” There is the god of wealth, the god of youth and beauty, the god of career success – all of these gods have their faithful adherents, willing to sacrifice all else in their service. There are gods of popularity and public opinion at whose beck and call our leaders too often abandon what they proclaim as principle. There is the god of celebrity – is anybody besides me deeply disturbed that one of the most popular television shows in our country is called “*American Idol*”? I have read an observation by a sociologist that if humankind was being watched by aliens from outer space, they might conclude, given the amount of time and money

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spent, the pageantry and the ritual behaviour, that our god was a god of sports. All of us know families who routinely spend their Sunday mornings at children's playfields or recovering from Saturday's game or getting ready for Sunday afternoon's game. I'm not speaking now of the once-a-season treat but of the habitual choice for the worship of sport over the worship of Christ.

It may seem like a picayune and even Pharisaic concern to be disturbed over the choice of other activities over worship attendance but let me be clear about why it troubles me. We do have difficulty keeping our promises, all of us. We are most successful, I think, when we have regular opportunity to remember the promises we've made and why we've made them. And, it's easier to keep promises when we are around other people who are engaged in doing the same. As another Lutheran pastor, Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson of Medicine Hat, Alberta, has written, "Each Sunday in a sense is a covenant renewal ceremony. We are given the opportunity to remember whose we are, who we are, where we are, where we are going and how to get there." So for those who keep a regular habit of worship with others at a time other than Sunday at 10:30 a.m., I say, "God bless you. Use your Sunday to sleep in or do whatever you need to do." To those who regularly study the Scriptures and pray with their families, I say, "Right on! Be sure to get regular contact with those who can guide your studies and enrich your prayer life." But to those whose week does not include worship on a regular basis, to those who rarely crack open a Bible, to those whose only prayer is one in times of stress, I say, "Beware! What's helping you stay faithful to God? How are you renewing your vow?"

The Children of Israel failed to keep their promise made before Joshua that day. Peter and the disciples failed to keep their promise made to Jesus. All of us, at some point or another, have failed or will fail to keep the promise we have made to God as well as promises we have made to others. It is inevitable. It is part of our broken nature, part of the Fall that finds an echo in all of our lives. But (Thanks be to God!) God has made provision for our weakness. In the life and work and death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Loving Creator, the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Rachel and Leah, the one celebrated by those fighting Israelites as Yahweh Sabbaoth, the God of the Hosts, this same almighty and all-merciful God, has offered us forgiveness and a new and abundant and everlasting life. When we fail, God calls on us to confess our failures and to accept a clean slate, through the love of God in Christ Jesus. And when we have accepted God's forgiveness again and again as is our need, then it is well for us to reaffirm our allegiance and our promise, to renew our vows. So join me this morning, in the promise of Joshua: As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Our culture may call us to join them in worshipping gods of wealth and success but "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Our human desires and our fear of death may tempt us to worship the gods of youth and beauty but "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Friends may ridicule our faith and call on us to worship the gods of popularity and public opinion but "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Family members may play upon our sympathies with their aspirations and desire us to serve the gods of sports and activities but "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Our desire to provide for our families and contribute to our community may tempt us to sacrifice time to the gods of careers and achievement but "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And so, my brothers and sisters, let us be witnesses one to another of what we have promised this day, encouraging one another in fulfillment and consoling each other when we fail, for our Loving Creator will surely

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forgive us through the grace of Christ and sustain us through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
In Jesus' name we make our vow and ask these things of God, Amen.