

November 6, 2011
Proper 27, A
Joshua 24:1-3a; 14-18

Last week we gathered for Music Awareness Sunday around a text early in the Old Testament book of Joshua. We met Joshua, just when he was leading the people into the promised land – across the Jordan river. And we watched with them in breathless wonder as the priests stepped out into the waters with the ark of the Lord on their shoulders, and the waters piled up, leaving dry ground for the people to pass over to the other side. And we thought a little bit about how music helps us pass safely through the turbulent waters of our lives.

This week we join Joshua again – but now at the end of the book, at the end of his life. Some of us probably know a little bit about Joshua. We know from that beautiful old African-American spiritual that he crossed a Deep River and his home was over Jordan. And then we know from that other more jaunty spiritual that he ‘fit’ the battle of Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down. I had a professor who used to say that we learn most of our best theology from our hymns, not our preaching – and this is obviously true of history, too!

The book of Joshua is mostly a long list of military triumphs. When the Israelites arrived in the promised land, it was not sitting there empty, waiting for them to occupy it, and to bring it under cultivation. Quite the opposite. It was full. It had people, with houses and fields and farms. It had families with beloved elders, and robust workers and laughing children. Just like anywhere else in the world, it had life – happiness, sadness, heartbreak, romance, intrigue, betrayal. The Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites, they all called it home. Until Joshua and his Israelites came charging across the river and began their conquest.

Just like all conquests it was horrible. Civilians were murdered. Crops were burned or plundered. Women were probably raped. Children pressed into slavery. That’s the part of the biblical narrative we don’t want to remember. There are no songs about the ethnic cleansing of the promised land. And we would be wrong not to pause here to remind each other that while we honour our scriptures, and we look for the word of God in our scriptures, we do not condone everything that we find in scripture. We are appalled by some of it.

At the beginning of chapter 24, **JOSHUA ASSEMBLED ALL THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL AT SHECHEM. HE SUMMONED THE ELDERS, LEADERS, JUDGES AND OFFICIALS OF ISRAEL, AND THEY PRESENTED THEMSELVES BEFORE GOD.** There are 12 tribes, of course. And they have spent the years since they conquered the Promised land fanning out, capturing cities, clearing out the existing population. Basically, moving in and setting up house in their new land.

Joshua gathers them all together, because he can see a problem. The 12 tribes have not come closer together while in this new land, they have actually grown apart. Wandering as a people in the desert was not fun, but at least it was a common experience. Here, in the new land – everyone went to their own corner. The tribe of Asher went that way, while Gad went over the hills. Reuban’s tribe went one way, and Issachar and Dan another. They flew apart – and in doing so, they developed new traditions, new cultures, new ways of being, so that there was a

danger that they might become enemies to each other – as the offspring of siblings sometimes do.

Something had to be done. Joshua gives them an ultimatum: **NOW FEAR THE LORD AND SERVE HIM WITH ALL FAITHFULNESS. THROW AWAY THE GODS YOUR FOREFATHERS WORSHIPED BEYOND THE RIVER AND IN EGYPT, AND SERVE THE LORD. BUT IF SERVING THE LORD SEEMS UNDESIRABLE TO YOU, THEN CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE, WHETHER THE GODS YOUR FOREFATHERS SERVED BEYOND THE RIVER, OR THE GODS OF THE AMORITES, IN WHOSE LAND YOU ARE LIVING. BUT AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD.**

In those days gods were fairly localized. You worshiped the god of your own well, or your own fig trees, or the god of the river down the road – a bit like keeping on the good side of your city counsellor. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. Probably when the Israelites arrived in the promised land at least some of them figured they'd better keep the local gods happy by making offerings to them. And it sounds as though others may have brought over a few of the gods from the other side of the Jordan – just in case.

On God's behalf, Joshua is disgusted. He brings them all together to force them to choose – who is going to be your god? And he lets them know where he stands: **AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD.** Not a local god – not a god of the water or the fire or the land under their feet. The God of heaven and earth – the one God, who, unlike all those other gods, wanted to be worshiped exclusively. If you want Jahweh on your side, you can't hedge your bets with other gods in your back pocket. If you want Jahweh, you must worship Jahweh alone. Tough call. Where will they put their hearts? Joshua is telling them: it matters. You must choose.

There is something terrible that takes place in people's minds as a result of war. Obviously there is something terrible that takes place on the ground – cities are destroyed, bodies are broken, lives torn apart. But something terrible takes place in people's minds as well. The horror, the fear, the rage, the grief, the guilt – the emotional toll of the violence changes the way people think. It turns the world into absolutes – friend or foe, adversary or companion, ally or enemy. There are no more shades of grey when you have been staring down the barrel of a gun – from either direction. Families are divided. Countries torn apart – walls erected to keep 'the other' on their side. And you limp forward in time – existing but not living, coping but not thriving. Shell-shocked. Afraid.

It is easy to look back at the years of the cold war and see the lingering psychological effects of the fear of the 1940s: McCarthyism, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the nuclear threat. It froze a generation of people who saw the world in black and white divided between friends and enemies. They were shell-shocked. Afraid. The question of where they would put their hearts really mattered. In Joshua's words: **CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE.** Tough call. It took a long time to choose anything other than fear.

What about our own day? We aren't at war. We live in one of the most affluent countries in the world, with one of the most stable economies – we probably enjoy one of the highest standards of living ever experienced in the history of the world. But sometimes we are afraid. When airplanes crash into banking towers, and young men and young women are prepared to strap explosives onto the soft skin of their own bodies in order to blow us up it is natural to be afraid. We don't understand the world any more. And banks are collapsing, mortgages are going down the drain, global economies are in turmoil. Everything is shifting under our feet.

For some it is an automatic reaction to slip into a black-and-white view of the world: friend or foe, ally or enemy, with us or against us? Put up a wall – hide behind the barricades – keep the stranger out. We have seen our western society putting up metaphorical walls and barriers – of racism, of prejudice, of conservatism. That's how it goes when you see the world in black and white – all the answers come in black and white as well.

In some ways we are acting as if we are shell-shocked, afraid. And now more than ever I think the question of where we put our hearts really matters. We must **CHOOSE FOR OURSELVES THIS DAY WHOM WE WILL SERVE.**

I want you to know that our Council has just made a huge decision – at least I think it's huge. And you'll be happy to hear that it won't cost a cent! That's good news during the annual Stewardship campaign. Very quietly, at the end of our last council meeting – by consensus, not by vote, we agreed to invite the Board of the London Mosque to come to meet the Council of our church. There isn't really an agenda – although we will probably have a couple of speakers just to break the ice. We aren't gathering to solve a problem, or to address an issue, or to accomplish a task. We are gathering to build a bridge. One little bridge from Muslim to Christian – in a world where the fearful rushing waters of misconception and prejudice are sweeping other bridges away. We are trying to build one little bridge – maybe just a footpath, maybe a little rope bridge, maybe a few stones in the river from our side to theirs. When you cross a bridge you get to the other side. And when you get to the other side things look different, even your side looks different!

I have a friend who says to me, “the best cup of tea is the fifth cup with a friend.” This might take a few cups of tea. It might take a few attempts at crossing the river. Friendships have to grow naturally – they cannot be forced. But hiding behind the barricade is definitely not going to help. Maybe one day we will be friends. Maybe one day we will see their faces, not their veils. Maybe one day they will see our hearts not our closed doors. But that is down the road. This day we must simply choose whom we wish to serve. **AS FOR ME AND MY council, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD.** We will build a bridge, and we will venture across it with our teapot in hand. I hope you will come, too.

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew's United Church, London, Ont.
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