

Shiloh United Methodist Church

War Stories: What do we do with them?

Joshua 5:13-15

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July 7, 2019

Joshua 5:13-15 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹³ When Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up. He caught sight of a man standing in front of him with his sword drawn. Joshua went up and said to him, “Are you on our side or that of our enemies?”

¹⁴ He said, “Neither! I’m the commander of the Lord’s heavenly force. Now I have arrived!”

Then Joshua fell flat on his face and worshipped. Joshua said to him, “What is my master saying to his servant?”

¹⁵ The commander of the Lord’s heavenly force said to Joshua, “Take your sandals off your feet because the place where you are standing is holy.” So Joshua did this.

(Break for first service for response to God’s word)

I have heard it said that Ben Franklin proposed at the constitutional convention that prayer be said each day. He didn’t do it to promote one religion or way of faith. Instead in hope that God’s divine providence might help overcome the delegates petty differences.

The convention turned him down on his proposal...not because it wasn’t a good idea, but because they couldn’t afford a chaplain.

Who knows how true this story is, but it helps us have hope for the integrity upon which our laws are built. Sometimes we do a lot to make sure a story helps support the way we think, and sometimes that can be empowering and other times it leads us to conflict and pain.

Story of Two Champions was told here

Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (pp. 72-73).
Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

Scripture is a challenging reality in the church of today, and for us as Methodists, we need to take some time to understand what scripture means for us to understand our call from Christ and the story of what God is doing in our lives.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist way of being Christian loved dearly a passage found in 2 Timothy to understand the role of scripture in the community.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, ¹⁷ so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

While this might seemingly point to scripture meaning the entire Bible, as we receive it is all inspired by God. It is important to remember our current Bible was not put together until nearly 400 CE. This passage in 2 Timothy referred to the holy text of the community it was written for. A reminder that while we have one Bible now, that holy texts have change throughout time. They have taken time to come together and to be molded into what we have today.

John Wesley goes on to say, “We know, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know likewise that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every [person’s] conscience.”¹

¹ <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/quinquag/WesleyEpistle1.html>

Meaning for us as Christians there will be parts of our Bible that attach more closely to our own conscious, our own call from God to let go of those things that separate us from God, sin, and to embrace a creator and God who lets us know we are loved.

Wesley finally says in a commentary on 1st John “We love [God] because he first loved us” — is “the sum of the whole gospel.”

Meaning the thing we should go to the gospel with is an understanding first that God is love, and that God has loved us before the cosmos and will love us after.

The book our scripture comes from today can make this last understanding challenging though. Joshua carries with it as many challenges as answers. Immediately after the chapter our scripture is in today is the battle of Jericho. We all know that song that goes with it. Here is what is hard, in scripture following the walls tumbling down it is said that 30,000 people, every living thing in the city is killed except of course the prostitutes family who let Joshua’s men into the city.

Beyond this section there is further destruction of massive amounts of life found in Joshua, all so that the people of God can have the land promised to them.

We don’t teach the killing of all living things in the city part in children’s Sunday school. And there is a problem with that, people stumble across it later in life and are confused why it was omitted. I am not saying our children here this as young ones, but they need to be told by us that it is in there as they develop.

There are three kinds of people when it comes to text like these.

1. People who explain these texts away by tying them into some long history of what God is doing and how it has to be right.
2. People who read these texts and question their faith, and what scripture really means or write off their faith entirely.

3. People who know every player for the New York Yankees.

I along with many others fall in the second category. When we stumble on these texts, we wonder what was going on in scripture.

The author of the book we are using for our study this summer, Rachel Held Evans, describes her experience when she started to research these texts.

She says the first thing that happened is she was a lot of fun at dinner parties, “So how was your day?”

“Good just doing some research and Bible study.”

“Oh, really? What were you looking into?”

“You know the part of the Bible where the people of God killed everyone.”

As Rachel explored these stories early in life, she asked some of her religious leaders in her tradition. They would do mental gymnastics to explain how God had to have all this death happen for Jesus to show up. In the end, when Rachel still didn't understand the need for all the killing, her leaders would say, “Well it is God's understanding and it is beyond us a humans.”

That isn't a wrong statement it just seems to convenient. Why would God need to kill thousands of innocent people just to set the stage for Jesus? The other challenge Rachel ran into is that when she started to question the inherency of scripture, she was ostracized from her community. Because she dared ask questions, she was isolated by those whom she worshipped and celebrated God with.

Rachel finally concluded after all of her work, “...accepting the Bible's war stories without objection threatened to erase my humanity.” She cites the great modern Christian theologian Eugene Petersen who

wrote The Message translation of the Bible as she speaks about how these text dehumanize Amorites, Canaanites and more. Eugene Petersen said “We don’t become more spiritual by becoming less human.”

There is actually I believe some ancient wisdom buried in the book of Joshua, it is part of text we read today. I wonder if the author’s of this book didn’t leave it there as a clue that even the writers of Joshua felt something was amiss in writing these war stories in such bloody and glorious way. Something happens after Israel enters the Promised Land and Joshua leads the way he wants, with violence.

First, he encounters God, another unknown figure, like the one who Jacob wrestled with, who in our scripture today does not choose a side. This is odd phrasing for a text that is dedicated to destroying one people to claim God was only on their side. The author could have claimed God’s force for Joshua, but instead he makes a point of saying God is for neither side.

Joshua went up and said to him, “Are you on our side or that of our enemies?”

¹⁴ He said, “Neither! I’m the commander of the Lord’s heavenly force. Now I have arrived!”

Second, and if you read beyond our text for today you will find this. In the Exodus story the Israelite people wandering in the desert receive mana from heaven. Food appears on the ground and will keep the people well-nourished for the day they encounter. It is God’s gift of enough to the people of Israel. Immediately after the troops begin to eat food that does not belong to them, the mana stops. Could this mean that when get greedy, God stops providing the simple sustenance that provides us having enough? There is abundance in knowing you

will have just enough to make it through one day, but God removes it when we dehumanize, steal, and begin to plunder and kill.

I think the writers of Joshua reminded us God doesn't take sides and God stops providing enough when we start to dehumanize our neighbor to remind us that Joshua is a story, it is hyperbole. That dehumanizing others is bad.

If we do further research we learn that Joshua is like many other texts of the same time period in the ancient middle east. Joshua's text talked of wiping out enemies in extreme fashion as other texts of the day did, as a form of nation building trash talk. My kingdom is better than your kingdom.

This does not explain away the genocidal tendency here, but it does help us understand we cannot take these text literally.

A friend in a study of mine recently asked, if this is the case, "Why don't we just throw out these texts?" My answer was, "For me as Christian my practice of faith calls me to study these texts along with other Christians around the globe. That we together might share the message of life found in Christ. That buried in these archetypal stories is a reminder that God has been at work in our hearts to care for one another for a long time, we just have failed to listen." And from this story of Jesus and the history of his people we learn quickly that Christians must study history to better understand what to learn from it, or they dare to repeat it.

Rachel Held Evans in her book says this:

THE WALLS

What took the walls of Jericho down?

Was it the shouts of a holy army, the guttural drone of seven shofars, the weight of God in the marching of human feet against a mighty empire's fortress? Or a ragtag gang of mercenaries, hungry for plunder, who talked a prostitute into betraying her people and unlocking the door?

It depends on who tells the story.

Who conquered the city of Jerusalem in 1099?

Was it crusaders on a mission from God to claim the Holy Land for Christ? Or unwitting soldiers sent by Rome to grow its coffers, so crazed by hunger, zealotry, and the promise of heaven that they massacred every living thing in their path until the blood of Muslims and Jews flowed through the streets?

It depends on who tells the story.

And who took Jerusalem back eighty years later?

Was it the city's original inhabitants, intent on avenging their grandparents and restoring their caliphate? Or followers of a false religion whose presence desecrates sacred ground to this day?

It depends on who tells the story.

What spirit carried ships to the shores of the New World and carved the American West with railway lines and wagon ruts?

Was it divine providence and pioneering grit? Or an evil, invading force that brought violence, illness, and plunder to the people for whom the land had always been home?

What set fire to Dresden, buried Tora Bora, and sank the Spanish Armada? What stained the fields of Gettysburg with blood?

For every battle a thousand tales could be told, yet we seldom hear more than one of them.

What took the walls of Jericho down?

Only God, who holds every story, knows.²

² Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (pp. 59-60). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

I think even the ancient authors knew that writing trash talk like Joshua was risky, but they did it because it showed how a beaten up rag-tag bunch of people fleeing Egypt could come together. While it is full of violence, I think the story of Jericho also has power for people who are emerging from years and years of being told they are less than human and slaves.

Martin Luther King Jr. himself used the story of Jericho to describe the long process America will have to continue under for the true equality written about in the Declaration of Independence can be imagined. It empowered people who were and are gunned down, sprayed with fire hoses, attacked by dogs, and pushed aside to protest without violence and have patience the walls would fall down.

Jesus along with the prophets invites us to remember this when he asks us to love one another, as God loves us.

I invite us to hear these words from the prophet Micah as we consider our call to reject texts of violence.

And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

— [Micah 4:3](#)

I call us to remember that we are invited to question our texts, to learn from them, and know that I pray you leave texts like Joshua with more questions than answers. I pray in your study that you know that the Bible's war stories force us to grapple with our own darkness and what humanity is capable of and that perhaps knowing the sins of those who go before us might help prevent us from doing likewise. Learning from the past is not such a bad thing.