

Read Through the Bible

Week 11, March 15-20, 2010

Readings: Deuteronomy 23- Joshua 3, Mark 14:51- Luke 1:1-80

Introduction to Joshua

Eugene Peterson, The Message

Land. Land flowing with milk and honey. Promised land. Holy land. Canaan land. The land. Joshua, Moses' successor as leader of Israel, was poised at the River Jordan to enter and take possession of Canaan, an unremarkable stretch of territory sandwiched between massive and already ancient civilizations. It would have been unimaginable to anyone at the time that anything of significance could take place on that land. This narrow patch had never been significant economically or culturally, but only as a land bridge between the two great cultures and economies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. But it was about to become important in the religious consciousness of humankind. In significant ways, this land would come to dwarf everything that had gone on before and around it.

The People of Israel had been landless for nearly five hundred years. The "fathers"—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons—had been nomads in the land of Canaan. That was followed by a long period of slavery in Egypt (over 400 years!), a miraculous deliverance into freedom led by Moses, and then forty years of testing and training for living as a free people under God's guidance and blessing.

The company camped at the Jordan on the day that opens the Book of Joshua had nearly half a millennium of slavery behind them. They were a dispossessed, ragtag crew—and only very recently set free. The transition from being landless slaves to landholding free men and women was huge. Joshua leads the transition, first in taking the land (chapters 1 through 12), then in distributing it among the twelve tribes (chapters 13 through 22), and concluding with a solemn covenant-witness (chapters 23 through 24) that bound the people to the gift of land and the worship of the God from whom they received it.

For most modern readers of Joshua, the toughest barrier to embracing this story as sacred is the military strategy of "holy war," what I have translated as the "holy curse"—killing everyone in the conquered cities and totally destroying all the plunder, both animals and goods. Massacre and destruction. "No survivors" is the recurrent refrain. We look back from our time in history and think, "How horrible." But if we were able to put ourselves back in the thirteenth century b.c., we might see it differently, for that Canaanite culture was a snake pit of child sacrifice and sacred prostitution, practices ruthlessly devoted to using the most innocent and vulnerable members of the community (babies and virgins) to manipulate God or gods for gain.

As the Book of Joshua takes the story of salvation forward from the leadership and teaching of Moses, it continues to keep us grounded in places and connected to persons: place names, personal names—hundreds of them. What we often consider to be the subjects of religion—ideas, truths, prayers, promises, beliefs—are never permitted to have a life of their own apart from particular persons and actual places. Biblical religion has a low tolerance for "great ideas" or "sublime truths" or "inspirational thoughts" apart from the people and places in which they occur. God's great love and purposes for us are worked out in the messes, storms and sins, blue skies, daily work, and dreams of our common lives, working with us as we are and not as we should be.

People who want God as an escape from reality, from the often hard conditions of this life, don't find this much to their liking. But to the man or woman wanting more reality, not less—this continuation of the salvation story—Joshua's fierce and devout determination to win land for his people and his extraordinary attention to getting all the tribes and their families name by name

assigned to their own place, is good news indeed. Joshua lays a firm foundation for a life that is grounded.

Introduction to Joshua

By Jerene Jacobson

Joshua is a story of conquest and fulfillment for the people of God. After many years of slavery in Egypt and 40 years in the desert, the Israelites were finally allowed to enter the land promised to their fathers. Joshua was God's chosen servant elected to represent his own tribe of Ephraim when the 12 spies were sent into Canaan to look over the land. Only Joshua and Caleb were ready to follow God's will and take immediate possession of the land. The Lord commanded Joshua to be strong and courageous for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. It tells how God commissioned his people, under Joshua to take Canaan in his name out of the hands of the idolatrous Canaanites. That was the only way in which the religion of Yahweh could be kept pure and undefiled.

War is a terrible curse that the human race brings on itself as it seeks to possess the earth by its own unrighteous ways. But it pales before the curse that awaits all those who do not heed God's testimony to himself or his warnings, those who oppose the rule of God and reject his offer of grace. The God of the second Joshua (Jesus) is the God of the first Joshua also. Although now for a time he reaches out to the whole world with the gospel (and commissions his people urgently to carry his offer of peace to all nations), the sword of his judgment waits in the wings-and his second Joshua will wield it.

Introduction to Luke

Eugene Peterson, *The Message*

Most of us, most of the time, feel left out—misfits. We don't belong. Others seem to be so confident, so sure of themselves, "insiders" who know the ropes, old hands in a club from which we are excluded.

One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club, or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are "in" and the others "out." The clubs range from informal to formal in gatherings that are variously political, social, cultural, and economic. But the one thing they have in common is the principle of exclusion. Identity or worth is achieved by excluding all but the chosen. The terrible price we pay for keeping all those other people out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a reduction of reality, a shrinkage of life.

Nowhere is this price more terrible than when it is paid in the cause of religion. But religion has a long history of doing just that, of reducing the huge mysteries of God to the respectability of club rules, of shrinking the vast human community to a "membership." But with God there are no outsiders.

Luke is a most vigorous champion of the outsider. An outsider himself, the only Gentile in an all-Jewish cast of New Testament writers, he shows how Jesus includes those who typically were treated as outsiders by the _religious establishment of the day: women, common laborers (shepherders), the racially different (Samaritans), the poor. He will not countenance religion as a club. As Luke tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?) now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus.

Reflections and Questions for Thought

By Jerene Jacobson

A trip to the Holy Land twenty five years ago during Lent keeps blessing my life! Scripture seemed to come alive as we walked in the footsteps of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem, through the winding street

of the Via Delorosa, past the Stations of the Cross, on to Golgotha where Jesus was crucified and to Mt. Zion, to the Garden of Gethsemane to peer into the empty tomb. This is the place where Jesus' body was laid and later resurrected. Come along as the story of the Passion of Christ unfolds.

After Jesus was arrested he was brought to the house of the high priest Caiaphas where he was ridiculed and beaten. The Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews was there. Many testified falsely against him charging him with blasphemy, which the law prescribed death by stoning. Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews. Jesus answered, "Yes." The crowd cried out to "Crucify him!" He was flogged and mocked by the soldiers and led away to be crucified.

Meanwhile, Peter cowardly followed at a distance in the shadows of the night of the courtyard and denied his association with Jesus three times, as predicted before a cock crowed twice. It was Peter, an apostle who said he would never forsake Christ. In Matthew 16:15-16, Jesus asked "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus called Peter "his rock" upon which the future church would be built. We hear of other failings of Peter which are symptoms of man's sinfulness or weakness which can be overcome through faith in Jesus.

How strong is our faith when we are met with tough decisions? Can we take a stand for Jesus in today's world? I think of my own failings when I have missed the mark. Are we followers of Christ in name only?

Jesus went stumbling through the street under his heavy load on his way to be crucified. Simon from Cyrene was walking past and was forced to carry the cross for Jesus, on the way to Golgotha where Jesus was nailed to the cross. A sign read the charges against him: This is Jesus King of the Jews. He was mocked, insulted and spat upon and was in deep agony. At noon, being the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. Jesus cried out to God and with a loud cry breathed his last breath. This loud cry was really "a great shout" - not a cry of despair but of a victor. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. He took the body, wrapped it in linen cloth and laid it in a tomb cut out of rock and rolled a large stone against the entrance.

Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Salome brought spices to anoint Jesus body early the next morning. They were surprised to see the big stone rolled away and an angel sitting there. The angel told them not to be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. Go and tell the disciples and Peter. He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. The women said nothing because they were afraid.

In Mark this was an unfinished story as verses 9-20 were added. Were the final pages of Mark's story lost? The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is always unfinished. It is a continual story, to be carried on in individual lives. There is an unwritten page left for each of us to write, our own record of what Jesus has said and done in us. All the works, God does in Christ are done for me and that I will arise and live with Him. As believers in Him, hell, death, the devil, and sin have been destroyed.

Scripture teaches that we are to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ. God is working on us even through difficult times and in suffering and doubt. We may not feel like we are being transformed, but God's Word assures us that He is constantly working on us molding us into a replica of Himself. Jesus left His disciples with instructions for His people "To go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The Holy Spirit empowered them to accomplish great things for God.

Today, like the disciples, we too are challenged to make the same decision to do great things for God who equipped us with the power of the Holy Spirit. **This is a command for us also to go and tell.** The fact Jesus rose from the dead guarantees our labor will not be in vain, as we serve, Him.

Easter provides a wonderful opportunity to consider the significance of the resurrection to our faith. We know that Jesus is alive. He is the holy Son of God who is worthy to receive glory, honor and praise! "Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Alleluia!" Let us prepare to celebrate our Risen Lord!

God provides opportunities for us to share our faith and what Christ has done for us in our lives. Have we learned to be obedient by sharing our faith lately? Have we learned to put more faith in Jesus?