

Sermon for September 22 at TUMC
Bushwhacking through Joshua/ A God of War, A God of Peace or
Neither

Just for the record, Joshua is not my favourite book in the bible despite the fact that it tells some of the stories I learned as a child, including The battle of Jericho – where the walls come a tumbling down and the story of the spys and Rahab who saves them.

The problem is that in order to really enjoy the stories, or teach them to our children one is tempted to ignore/or simply trek past, preferably without noticing, a whole lot of what is written in this book because so much of it is not suitable for children or the most sensitive among us.

As I think about how to walk through Joshua with you because my assignment is to look with you at its internal structure, I'm reminded of a hiking trail. Some of you hike – or enjoy walking. Most descriptions of hiking trails in Ontario include difficulty ratings.

1 is for easy, good for a stroll really.

2 is for moderate.

3 is for moderately technical, better wear good shoes

4 – technical – better wear hiking boots and

5 – difficult – come prepared for climbs, difficult footing and its probably going to take a while.

But what if there aren't any really good trails to the rocky outcrop where you know there's going to be a good view? Getting there without a trail is called bushwhacking or orienteering. You'd better have hiking boots and a compass and even good clothing won't necessarily protect

you from dense undergrowth full of blackberry canes that will manage to poke through the long pants you were glad you remembered to wear. That's what Joshua has felt like. There are many things along the way that poke and prod and scratch even through carefully chosen clothing. Especially difficult is the question of war and peace in Joshua and who is the God described here. A conversation with this book, as Tim emphasized last week, a faithful conversation with this book, forces us to slow down and carefully – very carefully peel back the thorny branches as we move through it. We have no choice but to take the branches seriously. This kind of trekking doesn't necessarily feel good other than the satisfaction that can come from not taking the easy way out. So why do it at all? Because our presence here this morning and week after week suggests that we have some level of commitment to listening for a Word from God in our worship, when we sing and pray and in the sermons we hear and all of these formats, worship, song, prayer and sermon are based on this book in front of me. And this book includes Joshua; one of the most difficult conversation partners in it; one that invites a conversation with texts that are neither pleasant nor straightforwardly applicable.

The text invites questions just like all difficult conversations usually do – like what really happened here? What is meant by what we read here? What are we supposed to do with it? And if we're listening for a Word from God – what does it reveal about God and ultimately what does it also reveal about us?

It starts great – Joshua 1 that Tim looked at last week situates Joshua, the first book of the prophets, squarely within the whole by including echoes of the law and the writings. Within this chapter Joshua is repeatedly encouraged to be “strong and of good courage.” We’re going to need that encouragement to stay with the difficult trekking ahead.

And right at the beginning we encounter the first log we have to climb over – what does it mean to cross into a land that God is giving to the Israelites when there are already people living there? What did that mean in the story? What did it mean when this was recorded - likely post-exile and what has it meant in the history of the people of God? Clearly the difficulties have begun. I expect lots of feelings are stirred up around this part of the conversation. The “promised land” motif has had plenty of identity shaping power for nations over the centuries for good and ill. And who is a God who promises land to one people when other people are living in it? I told you this wasn’t going to be easy.

As we continue, Chapter 2 tells the story of two spies and their encounter with the prostitute Rahab in Jericho and it is Rahab, the stranger and alien, who saves the spies, and reminds them that Yahweh, their God is God of heaven and all the earth. Rahab saves herself when she saves the spies. This part of the conversation invites the question – who is “in” and who is “outside” of the people of God? Hmm, maybe the God of this book hasn’t prescribed things as tightly as it seems at first. For now let’s continue to pick our way through and around these trees

until we come to a river across the trail. On our particular hike we'll have to look for stones to step on in order to cross it, because God hasn't yet chosen to stop water for me when I need to navigate difficult water crossings. In chapter 3 and 4 God does stop the water for the Israelites when they cross the Jordan. In the middle of the dry riverbed, as instructed, they collect stones to take with them to the other side so that when their children ask, "What do these stones mean?" they can tell them that they crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground." God stopped the flow of the river for them here just like God did at the Red Sea. Why? We are told it was so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of Yahweh is mighty, and so that all may fear Yahweh their God forever." This story ends with another God identifying statement – the hand of Yahweh is mighty.

Now the walk through the book of Joshua begins to climb through a section of rituals in chapter 5. Both Circumcision and Passover are practiced here to mark the completion of their wandering in the desert. As well they eat the produce of the land for the very first time and the manna, the bread from heaven, that had been provided for them in the wilderness stops.

Now after the rituals, I would say that at this point in the trail we have come to a clearing.

It's time to stop here with Joshua for a moment and take in this next scene. This is where Joshua has an encounter with the commander of the army of Yahweh. In this encounter he looks up and sees a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua is strong

and courageous and goes to him and asks him, ‘Are you one of us, or are you one of our adversaries?’

He replied,

Neither; but as commander of the army of Yahweh, I have now come.

Joshua appropriately falls on his face and worships, and he says to him, “What do you command your servant, my lord?” The commander of the army of Yahweh said to Joshua, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.” And Joshua did so.

In the holy of holies (reminiscent of Moses and the burning bush)–

Joshua again hears a challenge to his understanding of “us” and “them.”

The commander of Yahweh’s army is not one of the “us” or “them.” The commander of Yahweh’s army is wholly Other, (spell it) and in this otherness

commands respect

opens up a Holy Space

and speaks.

Who is this God of Joshua? - a being completely other, who converses through messengers, and creates different categories than the ones that Joshua assumes are important. This clearing on the trail through Joshua is theologically critical, in fact pivotal, for the difficulties so far and the ones yet to come. This image is also reminiscent of an image in our NT, Hebrews 4:12ff. Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render account. I don’t

know about you but it's difficult to want to remain in this clearing where one can be seen so clearly. Clearings are generally warm and sunny and less buggy than other parts of the trail, but they're also the place you are more likely to encounter a Grizzly – that great bear of the Northwest that in its “otherness” might decide to ignore you or tear you apart and not knowing which way it will go is terrifying. Can we accept that the Word of God is this kind of Other – even and especially in a book like Joshua? If we truly accept that the Word of God is this kind of Other no wonder it provokes difficult conversation. Even so, what questions do we even dare to ask this God? It's a good time to remember to “Be strong and courageous.”

Carrying on and back into the undergrowth – in chapter 6 the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

Chapters 7 through 11 describe the heart of the conquest of Canaan and here is where the blackberry canes on the trail scratch and claw at me causing feelings of revulsion, disgust and discouragement. These are the chapters that have caused some to want to excise the book of Joshua from the bible.

At the end of 7 Achan and his family are brutally executed for keeping some of the things that were supposed to be devoted to Yahweh.

In chapter 8, men, women and children are slaughtered, the King of Ai is hung from a tree. In chapter 10 more kings and their people are utterly destroyed, the kings hung from trees or struck down by the sword. And over and over again we hear that God fought for Israel or God gave their enemies into their hands.

The only way I can pass this way at all is to know that as part of this difficult conversation – the conquest narrative here – is almost exactly the same as other conquest narratives of the time. It is formulaic. The people destroy their enemies with their tribal or local god's permission or assistance. It's one possible answer for what is going on here. Is it sufficient for anyone who has lost someone to the violence of war? Not likely. Is it an explanation that will deter someone from using these passages to justify war? It hasn't so far. Kyrie Eleison.

The path breaks out of the thorns for a bit in chapter 9. Here the Gibeonites fool the Israelites by pretending to be from a distant land. God has said that Israel can make peace with tribes from a distance and so the Gibeonites pretend to be from a long way off and so Joshua makes peace with them before he finds out they were really Canaanite neighbours. Since Joshua can't go back on his word the Gibeonites become drawers of water and hewers of wood for Israel, but are not destroyed. Could it be that somewhere in this text there is a longing for peace?

By Chapter 11, Joshua has taken the whole land and the land finally had rest from war. Do we hear another echo of a longing for peace in the rest that God really intended for the whole land and its inhabitants?

Chapter 12 lists the kings that Joshua has defeated and chapter 13 contradicts chapter 11. Joshua was old and advanced in years and very much of the land remained to be possessed. And so as the conversation continues, we ask so then did Joshua really take all the

land or not?" Maybe the text is not only having a conversation with us, it is having a conversation with itself.

This next part of the trail is long and tedious. The trees all start looking the same when you read through the detailed geographical divisions of the land allotted to each tribe as their inheritance. This continues until chapter 19.

In Chapter 20 cities of refuge are set up.

Chapter 21 is about the allotment and the inheritance for the priests.

And just when you think things have settled down and our hike through the book may be coming to a close we have this curious incident or story in chapter 22. The Israelite tribes of Reuben, and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh who had helped the rest of the Israelites with the conquest now wish to return to their allotment of land east of the Jordan. When they get home to their tents they set up an altar to Yahweh in their own territory and so the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh, to make war against them. Will there be war of brother against brother? Are we back in the brambles? When I examine my feelings at this point in the text, I'm completely war weary and can't believe what I'm reading. Fortunately the priest Phinehas is sent to enquire of the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh – 22:16, What is this treachery that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away today from following Yahweh, by building yourselves an altar in rebellion against Yahweh? If you do this God will be angry with all of us. Their accusations reveal their misunderstanding and their fears. The altar as the Reubenites insist was intended as a memorial to Yahweh so that their children would not

forget to worship the God of Israel. Phinehas accepts their explanation and war is averted.

Phew!!! That was close. Have they actually successfully navigated a conflict situation without war against each other? So far Russia and Syria and the US have succeeded in averting an escalation of the war in Syria. Will we be successful in the church in avoiding verbal wars with each other when we disagree about how to live faithfully? Will we listen long enough to have our own misunderstandings corrected and fears relieved? Do I once again hear a longing for peace? In me – certainly - those are the longings that I bring to the text and my conversation with it. Does this story reveal a longing for peace of the God who is wholly and completely Other – not us or them?

The book then closes in chapters 23 and 24 with a rest for Joshua and the people of Israel from all their enemies. In this time and place of rest, they hold a covenanting ceremony where Joshua famously asks them to choose this day whom they will serve. And with that question we find ourselves at the end of our trek likely ready ourselves for a well-earned rest.

What do we do with this book and the God it reveals? So often the Word of God in Joshua has been treated like a war-criminal with known or presumed guilt. As such it is treated as if it deserves interrogation so that a suitable punishment can be determined but not so that it can be let go free or ask its own questions of us. But the image of the commander of Yahweh's army gives us pause. Does this text represent the "Other" that is God's word to us? Is the place where we stand when

we read it, Holy ground? Does it ask us to confess our own propensity for war, our quickness to believe that God agrees with us and therefore sanctions our actions rather than the actions of our enemies or those with whom we disagree? Can the conversation we have with it be constructive, critical and confessional? I think it can if we genuinely ask, What happened, if we acknowledge the difficulties as we go along and realize that as part of the whole story of God's people the conversation we have with it has and continues to reveal as much about us as it does about God. Granted the conversation with scripture doesn't stop with the first Joshua, but continues with the second one, known by the same name but in Greek as Jesus. Ephesians 2 that Anne read is a familiar text about how Jesus in his very body destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between those who are far off and those who are near. There is just enough ambiguity in the book of Joshua about God and the people that a traceable trajectory towards Jesus' act of peacemaking is discernable. But today, I don't want to rush to that as a solution if it takes us away from taking our conversation with this book seriously. And who says that the conversations with the Word made flesh (or Jesus) are less difficult anyway? I've done my share of bushwhacking with Jesus as my companion. My prayer is that attentiveness to the book of Joshua opens rather than closes conversations between the wholly Otherness of God and ourselves as difficult as they may be. And that the openness of this conversation leads to the actions for peace that Anne emphasized in her story with the children.

