

Sermon 11-8-20  
Paul Purdue preaching

Before we get into the heart of the sermon, I want to address an issue with the text. Joshua describes a theology that we now see in a clearer light. After offering the people the option of serving old comfortable gods, Joshua calls the people into a harder covenantal relationship with a God of expectation. When the people quickly chirp that they are all in, Joshua warns them, "You can't serve the Lord, because God is a holy God. The Lord is a jealous God. God won't forgive your rebellion and your sins." The Old Testament prophets will move beyond Joshua's punitive unforgiving theology singing: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent. The Lord is good to all, and God's compassion is over all that God has made." (Psalm 145; Jonah 4) Jesus describes God's love as forgiving seventy times seven to the seventh power. (Matthew 18) On the cross Jesus perfects our kingdom ethos, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." God may stay the same as our understanding progresses. Some reject progressive theology. The writer of Hebrews did not, quoting Jeremiah 31 God says, "I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." Hebrews adds this blunt commentary, "In speaking of 'a new covenant,' God has made the first one obsolete." (Hebrews 8) (Paul calls circumcision "nothing"! 1 Corinthians 7:19) Joshua's idea of a "jealous Go" describes a God with a pulse who does not stand so far away from us as to not be wounded by our unfaithfulness. A "jealous" God seeks an "honest and faithful" relationship with humanity.

Okay, I just wanted to start with that and then begin my sermon like this: Back in the days of old, when corny preacher jokes often launched sermons, there was a very small and somewhat fictitious church where the folks fed on a steady diet of fire and brimstone. After a big successful revival, they headed down to the river to baptize. They sang loud hosannas as the baptized waded into and out of the water. Unfortunately, as one of the newly justified saints came up out of the water shouting "glory to God," their long white robe caught on a protruding tree root. With a loud rip, the robe came untethered as they backslid into the stirred up waters, landing as a muddy mess. The singing stopped abruptly as the congregation gazed on in horror. Alarmed and inspired, the preacher shouted out, "Do not look or the Lord will strike you blind!" The congregation closed their eyes offering the re-baptized member time to gather themselves. Mrs. Horace Johnson rushed over, with her head tilted so as to avert her eyes, to help the fallen and cover them with an oversized daisy print comforter that doubled as a beach towel. Everyone congratulated the preacher for speaking so powerfully and decisively. They wrapped up the afternoon with good-natured chuckles while singing "Wash Me and I will be Whiter than Snow." On the way home, a couple of fifth grade besties chatted about the humorous baptism. Pat whispered to Bobby, "That preacher lied. You won't go blind if you look at something like that!" "How do you know that Bobbie?" asked Pat. Pat crowed, "I looked!" Genuinely horrified, Bobbie's voice jumped an octave as he worried, "Pat, you could have gone blind!" Pat smiled smuggy and said, "Well, I only risked one eye!"

The book of Joshua closes with two different farewell speeches. If you remember, Joshua was one of two courageous spies who became Moses' trusted associate. After escaping slavery and wandering for forty years in wilderness, Joshua led the people into the Promised Land. The book of Joshua tells the settlers' story. That conquest reads like our American western conquest history complete with brutal treatment of native peoples. So we need to be careful in applying the text, for it has been used to justify the worst kinds of inhumane sinfulness including ethnic cleansing. The twelve or so Israelite tribes would become a loose tribal alliance. Without a king or standing army, the people were stirred to action by charismatic leaders like Joshua, Sampson, or Deborah. Our passage begins as Joshua is about to die. The newly formed tribal Promised Land Alliance is shaky and standing at a crossroads.

The book of Joshua closes with two different farewell speeches in two different cities. Joshua's second farewell speech serves as an alternate ending to the book, perhaps added later. The second speech takes place in Shechem. Unlike Jericho, Joshua's trumpets did not knock down Shechem's walls. Shechem sat along an important trade route linking Galilee and Judea. It was nestled in a mountain pass 1800 feet above sea level between two 3000 foot mountains which the Canaanites called sacred. The Samaritans would build a second Jewish temple on one of the mountains. Jesus and a Samaritan woman would one day sit near this city chatting about religion and rival Jewish temples.

Shechem was a mid-sized prosperous city located in an oasis of olive trees and mountain streams. In the early 20th century, archaeologists excavated the ruins of an ancient temple there to some local god. The temple dominated Shechem, built up with fill dirt and rock, they engineered a temple mount, or rampart, that made the Shechem temple visible above the city's double-lined or casement walls. It featured state of the art 17 foot thick walls to support a roofline some three stories high. History has lost all the Gentile songbooks and sacred texts that were used in this temple. We do not even know the names of the gods the people worshipped there. Likely they worshipped fertility gods, asking them to bless the harvest more than to bring babies.

Some imagine the second speechwriter placing Joshua by some mountain stream with the foreign temple rising behind him. Others imagine Joshua preaching on the Shechem temple mount itself. The text makes no mention of any pagan artifacts. However, given the setting, it is no surprise that Joshua reminds the people that they once worshipped other gods. Indeed, the people listening still have rival gods (right in Shechem) they need to put away.

What comforting old gods do we need to put away? Where are the blindspots in our old time religion? What misplaced loyalties divide our hearts and vision? Are our hearts hard, half in, or wandering? Do we dare say with the ancient hebrews: "*God, forbid, that we fail to serve God with all our hearts, all our souls, and our minds? Do we stumble on Christ's second command to love neighbors, strangers and opponents with the same loving-kindness and ethical justice that we want for ourselves? Do we*

crave a God of lower expectation? Do we pledge our allegiance to teams, activities, entertainment, parties, or a nation that asks very little of us? Do we follow Jesus with one eye on the prosperity, market, and consumption gods? Jesus bluntly declared, "You can not serve two masters, God and wealth," and that "the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth chokes God's word and we never bear any (spiritual) fruit." (Mathew 6:24, 13:22, 22: 37) There are other options out there: you can serve the feel-good gods. We can give a little, worship some and pray when in a pinch. It is our choice. We can embrace God's more demanding covenant. We can serve our people or all people. We can seek the comfortable or build God's kin-dom. We can serve ourselves or choose to be significant.

Now, our prayers, tithes, and daily meditations matter. They sustain us, but God long for more. God holds bigger expectations. Moses' covenant said to *treat the immigrant as the native born*. The prophets demand to *let justice roll down like the mighty waters*. John the Baptist taught that *if you have two coats, give one away*. As Jesus said, "*there is one thing you lack, go and sell stuff and give it to the poor, then come and follow me!*" John Wesley taught that "*altogether (authentic) Christians love every person in the world; even the enemies of God.*" (The Almost Christian) Dr. King said, "*We feel that we are the conscience of America – we are its troubled soul. We will continue to insist that right be done because both God's will and the heritage of our nation speak through our echoing demands.* (NYT magazine 1962) We pray, '*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven'...*'"

Oh dear siblings in Christ, right now our world is reeling from twin pandemics needing us to keep our eyes on God's prize. No one needs any more half-hearted Christians who spout Jesus slogans but neglect earthly justice. What will we choose: comfort or a demanding covenant with God? Who will we be? Will it be said of us, "*Blessed are those peacemakers, who stood up for justice- they were the children of God when we needed them!*" Will we put away that old time religion that held revivals while our nation sent native nations down a trail of tears, stood with slaveholders, denied women's rights, legalized Jim Crow, and told people who they could not marry? Jesus invites us to embrace "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." (Matthew 23:23) Will our faith be self-centered or significant? Will we do justice, love mercy, feed the hungry, bring healthcare, forgive "them" again, speak truth to power, turn the other cheek, wage peace, resist evil, undo oppression, fight for justice, and walk humbly with God. If we walk humbly with God, then we will walk humbly with each other. Will our faith be self-centered or significant?

Now before we too quickly pledge our allegiance with many "God forbids", Know: it will not be as easy. God holds deeper expectations. Joshua taunts our cheap faith, "God is too Holy... You can't do this." Jesus calls us to shoulder a cross for the benefit of others. Our vows bear witness against us: asking "*Did you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression... did you confess Jesus Christ and keep your promise to serve Christ as your Lord, in union with the Church?* Jesus The Christ warns us that it will be rough, your nation and church may cast you out: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all

kinds of evil against you falsely because you (build a kin-dom of love and justice). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5) Indeed, government and church leaders crucified Jesus. While- poor people, sick people, those rejected, those labeled, and hardworking forgotten people embraced Christ's kin-dom.

But, hear the good news. After warning us that people will bad mouth us and try to harm us, Jesus offers hope saying, "You are the salt of this earth," preserving and seasoning a misguided world. "You are the light of the world," opening eyes, bearing loving-kindness and establishing justice. Let your light shine, do not cover it up in fear. The thickest foggiest night can't snuff out our light! Light tramples the night. Love wins. Hope endures! Faith overcomes! Love may be crucified, dead and buried, but it will rise again. Light will break forth, going ahead of us to show us the way, the truth and the life. So who will we be? Let us be people of love, light and significance. Amen.