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The National Presbyterian Church

## **The Jericho Maneuver**

Joshua 5:13-6:5

"A soft answer turns away wrath" Prov. 15:1

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In our Sermons this fall and through the winter, we're looking at stories of the Bible as they develop chronologically, with the help of a book called "The Story." We come this morning to Chapter 7 in "The Story" and to sixth book in the Bible, The Book of Joshua.

The book describes events that take place about 1400 years before Christ. The descendants of a person called Abraham (see Genesis 12ff), the Hebrews or Israelites, have been set free from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and after a further 40 years of needless wandering through the desert (their destination postponed for decades because of their grumbling, murmuring and general disobedience to God), they now come to the western edge of the promised land, in what is now Jordan. And under the leadership of their new leader, Joshua, they cross the river to the nearby city of Jericho. And, as in the history of our own nation and countless others, ahead of them lies one battle after another – to take the land.

In fact the whole of the first half of the book of Joshua, is about these various battles and raises some of the issues that I mentioned last Sunday in some detail: about the brutality that we see in much of the Old Testament story

So, by way of reminder:

the Bible is both divine and complicated, and while Jesus is the lens or filter through which we read Scripture, nevertheless, the world into which God enters, and within which God works (before Jesus and after, and during his life-time: remember the brutality of the crucifixion!) is often a very nasty place, and God somehow has to meet people and communicate with people within their own frame of reference – the world as they know it (16<sup>th</sup> century theologian, John Calvin, calls this, "accommodation" – God accommodates himself to us).

This is true, even when morally and spiritually we are a long way off from the standards of Jesus, which is precisely the case in the world of the Exodus and Joshua: the world of the occupation of the promised land. It was a dog-eat-dog world, and God meets his people where they are, in the murky messy middle, where *some really bad stuff happens*. Some of it in the name of God! Though it's really important to remember that some *really good stuff happens too!* (Also, in the name of God.)

Including, for example, some remarkable and enlightened laws (that don't make it into our chapter in "The Story," because, well, they are not "stories" but rules and regulations! Nevertheless, these rules and regulations are gems of grace and enlightenment, buried like diamonds in the middle of the blood and gore. In some ways we need to see them as functioning like little seeds, ready to grow and under the existing order of violence and chaos.

In fact, let me read you one such passage found in the Book of Leviticus (generally not many people's favorite book), but these are laws that flow from the Ten Commandments; powerful

words from thousands of years ago, that form the basis of any civilized society, and do so still today. Listen to Leviticus 19:9, 13-16, and 18.

<sup>9-10</sup>When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien (this law provides a “social safety net”)

<sup>13</sup>You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal – by keeping for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. (this is basic labor law).

<sup>14</sup>You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God (this is the equivalent of our ADA: it’s the “Hebrews with Disabilities Act” – not from 1990, but from 3000+ years ago)

<sup>15</sup>You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: (this is a summary of what’s written on our Supreme Court: “EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL”)

<sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, (we’re dealing here with the law for libel)

AND THEN

<sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but. you shall love your neighbor as yourself (and this is what Jesus picks up on at the center of his teaching: Yes! *LOVE* in Leviticus, in the midst of blood and gore; Matthew 22:35-40)

So, here in Leviticus there is this second side to the Old Testament, a beautiful side that stands in contrast to the old-dog-eat dog world into which the descendants of Abraham come, so that through them, *God slowly brings order out of chaos and civilization out of barbarity* to a needy world. But nothing happens overnight, and, as we are all well-aware, especially, from the history of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, brutality and barbarism can return in a decade, and the civilization we depend upon and assume, can be undermined in a heart-beat. And this we must never forget!

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So all of this is by way of introduction, leading up to one of the most famous stories in the Bible, the story of THE BATTLE OF JERICHO, where the people of Israel cross the Jordan River, and enter the promised land, and come face-to-face with an obstacle that is real and huge: the walled city of Jericho.

AND at that moment, Joshua and his people have three options:

- the first is to be terrified and run away
- the second is to make a full military assault on the city
- and the third is to do (as Monty Python used to say!) “something completely different”

Which is what God leads them and tells them to do:

- March around the city – all the warriors circling the city once.
- Do this for six days, with seven priests blowing trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark of the covenant.
- On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests still blowing the horns.

- Then make a final long blast, and everyone shouts with a great shout;
- and the wall of the city comes tumbling down: falls down flat
- and the army of the Israelites walk right in” And that’s it.

Something completely different!

Archaeologists, of course (and quite rightly), have entered the picture to see if this really happened. And (perhaps not surprisingly) they agree and disagree on the meaning of the data

The two leading archaeologists are the late Kathleen Kenyon and Bryant Wood, and they disagree, for example, on the exact date and enemy causing Jericho’s destruction: *when* it was, and whether or not it was *the Hebrews or some other army or force* that caused it.

So there’s disagreement. But on the positive side, there is also agreement, and some of it is important. They agree that

- Jericho itself dates back to c.9000BC and is the oldest know city in the world.
- and that it was in fact a walled city
- and that somewhere between 1600BC and 1400 BC the walls did in fact “come crashing down.”

Though “as to how exactly” the destruction happened – the means or methods God used – well, historically, we’re all in the dark:

I. **Maybe it was a direct action of God** – through his angels.

Remember that just before the battle, Joshua had a remarkable vision of angels who are described as “the army of God”

Joshua 5:13-14 reads as follows:

Joshua looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?” He replied, “Neither: but as the commander of “the army of the Lord” I have now come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and worshiped.

So, it’s not impossible, that the destruction of the city walls occurred as a direct action of God.

II. **OR**, on the other hand, that in the providence of God, **the circling of the city coincided with a devastating earthquake.**

Jericho lies on the meeting point of two tectonic plates and there have been at least 8 earthquakes recorded in the last 2000 years (see <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1029/2000JB900313>)

So we’ve no clue how it actually happened. Though what we DO know, is that God told his people that if they wanted to win this particular battle, *then they would have to do something completely different. NOT deal with the problem, the insuperable obstacle, head on, but, as it were, come at from the side, from a different angle.*

And in our lives we really need to pay attention to this. Just like Joshua and the people, when we reach some kind of a barrier -- an obstacle in our way, an experience, a difficulty, a failure, or a person, that we cannot fix or solve, then perhaps it’s time to remember Joshua, and to consider what I’ll call the “Jericho Maneuver”

- give up the illusion that we know everything about the situation
- and instead -- try “something completely different” and take a risk to resolve our predicament

A man called **Edward De Bono** used to call this approach to problem solving, “**Lateral Thinking**”: approaching a problem from a different side. And he applied it for example to what was called the elevator problem

As buildings grew taller and taller, annoying waits for an elevator, grew longer and longer. There were only so many elevators you could fit into a building, and there was a limit to their speed!!

So what was the solution to this annoyance?

Well at least one solution was not to change the waiting time, but to change people’s perceptions of their waiting time! And do it with mirrors in the elevator lobby! Isn’t it true that time flies when you are looking at yourself OR others(!) in a mirror?

Or think about **the world of societal change** – where the most famous “Jericho Maneuver” came at the hands of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: Non-Violent Resistance. It makes no sense – it seems to be powerless; but Gandhi and King proved to be right in seeing that when Jesus taught us to love our enemies, He wasn’t simply asking us to be doormats, but was calling us to unleash a God-given force that had the power to wear opponents down, and strike at their better conscience in a way that direct violence or confrontation often does not so says King:

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you. But by our capacity to suffer, we will soon wear you down. And in winning our freedom -- we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process. (*Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 194)

Or think about **trouble in a relationship** in which 2 people are going round and round in circles, and getting nowhere good fast

Counselor David Augsburger (*Caring Enough To Confront*), thinks that the problem is often caused by something simple like the lack of willingness to be honest, to actually speak the truth in love. He describes a common conversation like this:

“It’s ok honey, no problem,” you say to your spouse on the phone.

But it’s not. It’s the fourth night in a row that he or she has chosen to work late and called you with last minute apologies. It’s not really okay with you - even though you continue saying that it is.

But that’s always been your style: “Be agreeable, give in to others, say everything’s okay, bottle up your feelings” until finally you explode over some stupidly-simple-thing, and say things you hate – as soon as you hear yourself say them.

So he asks: *How do you get out of this never-ending circle?*

Well: try “something completely different” – take the risk: speak the truth, as a “Jericho Maneuver”

- For some the Jericho Maneuver is Honesty
- While for others it’s a matter of tone: it’s a “soft word” that contains the power (*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* Proverbs 15:1)

And maybe then, the walls of animosity will come tumbling down?

Or, one more example: in **the realm of money**.

The late Christian psychiatrist, Carl Menninger, counseled many people who were worried sick about their future, even though they had lots of money!!

And after years of working with all kinds of people he reached the conclusion *that generous people – are rarely emotionally ill!*

In an article in a magazine called The Ministry of Money, he said that he once asked a wealthy patient: “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose!” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No” responded the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving any of it away to somebody else!”

Now this terror (said Menninger) is real. He goes on, “When we let go of money (chose the Jericho maneuver) we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security.” But this, he adds, is precisely why it is important to do it (to discover the paradox that God has built into life, that when we hold on to life (as if we owned it) – we lose it. But when we lose it for Jesus sake – we find it. So Menninger quotes Jesus who says to us “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.” (Lk 9:23).

Back to Joshua and Jericho!

I cannot even begin to imagine the weird looks and scornful laughter that Joshua must have faced when he told his generals what everyone was supposed to do. It was nuts. Absurd. Useless.

But Joshua had the humility to know that he wasn't in control. His horizon of understanding was limited. And that more was going on with God than he could see. And in this case he was right.

And maybe it's time for us to test this possibility out too? So that instead of “full steam ahead,” pushing against one immovable object after another, we slow down, listen to God and ask:

“Is there a Jericho Maneuver in my life  
that I need to pay attention to?”

And that will, as at Jericho, open up a future  
that at the moment I cannot see?

Circle the city! Blow the horns! Shout and perhaps those insuperable walls will actually come tumbling down?

Quite a risk! Worth a shot?

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