

July 11 – Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho

Joshua 6:1-17

This story isn't maybe totally obscure – how many of you have at least heard of it?

If you ever listen to old time gospel music, you might have heard the song, Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho. The song is an African American spiritual – and as is true of many spirituals that pertain to the story of God freeing Israel from slavery, it strikes a chord of freedom in the hearts of the enslaved people.

The book of Joshua tells the story of Israel's arrival into Canaan and their defeat of the people already living there.

This story is not one that shows up in the usual lectionary readings for worship. There are only 3 readings from Joshua that do. The first is the story of Israel finally crossing the Jordan River into Canaan after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

The second is the story of the first Passover celebrated in Canaan. And the 3rd is the last chapter – one that has been embroidered on countless throw pillows and wall hangings – choose this day whom you shall serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Joshua is part of what is called the Deuteronomistic History. It includes Joshua, Judges, first and second Samuel, and first and second Kings. All were written by the same author, or group of authors. Those books tell Israel's story from the time of Moses' death at the end of Deuteronomy, to the exile in Babylon.

So what's the significance of this story?

To understand that, we need to go back about 500 years...to Abraham. Remember the promise God made to Abraham – God told Abraham he would have many descendants and become a great nation. God told Abraham that he would live in a land God promised to give him and that he would be blessed so that in him, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

All along the way, the promise was threatened. First, Abraham and Sarah were childless and Sarah was long past child-bearing age. God took care of that and Isaac was born. Isaac had twin sons, and one of those sons, Jacob, bore the promise to the next generation.

Jacob had 12 sons, had his name changed to Israel and those 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel.

The next threat to the promise was famine. The family could have died. Instead they traveled to Egypt where it turned out their brother Joseph was an economic wizard and was able to save the family.

In Egypt Abraham's descendants did grow into a multitude...maybe not more than stars in the sky but still a lot.

So the first promise was kept.

But then, the next threat struck – they became slaves in Egypt. They were slaves in a land not their own, and this promise of a land of their own flowing with milk and honey seemed like a pipe dream.

Enter Moses...and through him, God led the people out of slavery into freedom. It took a 40 year wilderness experience to make them into the people God needed them to be. But now, in Joshua's story, they've arrived. And God is helping them clear the land of other potential threats.

At this point in the story, two parts of God's promise have been fulfilled...one, Abraham's ancestors have multiplied and become a great nation...two, they've been given the land God promised.

Israel's conquest of the land is interesting. Some of the battles are just regular old battles. But this one is different. This one is meant to show that it is God that is fulfilling the promise...they are not doing it by their own military savvy or strength.

The part that has yet to be fulfilled is the promise that through Israel all the families of the world would be blessed. I find it difficult to get past the violence of this part of the biblical story. All of Jericho and its inhabitants were to be destroyed...except Rahab the prostitute. Earlier in the story, we learn that she hid the Israelite spies who'd come to plot against Jericho. Rahab by the way is also listed in Jesus' genealogy.

Anyway, everyone else...doomed. That doesn't seem much like blessing.

But, there's a long view here. Ultimately, the promise needed to be kept alive. For Israel to fulfill its mission of blessing the world, they needed the stability and protection that numbers and land could give them. It would appear that keeping the promise alive trumped everything else.

Because the way Israel ultimately became the fulfillment of that promise was a surprise to everyone – the ultimate fulfillment of the promise happened when a peasant mother gave birth to the incarnation of God in a stable in Bethlehem.

Nobody marching around Jericho blowing rams' horns could have seen that coming.

It's also finally in the death and resurrection of Jesus that the issue of violence gets resolved.

That's a whole other sermon, but suffice it to say that Jesus death and resurrection was to put to death any notion that God's way of working is through God's own violence.

So the main take away from this story, and really the whole biblical story, is that God promised to bless the whole world through Abraham's family and God would let nothing stand in the way of fulfilling that promise. But patience is required. In this story Israel is 500 years into this business of being God's chosen people.

And trusting God's promise also requires a willingness to be ready for God to work in unexpected ways...ways that don't even make sense.

I mean marching around a city blowing trumpets? Maybe by this point in the story Israel trusts God so fully that they didn't even question how ridiculous this seemed.

But if I put myself in their shoes, I think I would have struggled a bit...although I would like to blow a shofar sometime.

Ultimately, God would do something even more unexpected. When you read the stories of Israel's conquests in Canaan, you can understand how that shaped their expectations of how God would act in the future.

This story comes long before any of the prophets began to speak of a Messiah. But think about how stories like this one might have shaped the image of that Messiah.

As they remembered their history, Israel would remember stories of their conquests in Canaan. They would remember Joshua and the Battle of Jericho.

They would also remember their own conquest by Babylon as their own punishment from God.

No wonder they expected a Messiah who would act like that...a Messiah who would defeat and destroy their Roman oppressors.

But the Messiah did none of that. In an astoundingly unexpected turn of events...more astounding even than this Jericho story...the Messiah went willingly to a cross. That changed forever for us our understanding of God and violence.

God, in the person of Jesus, was willing to suffer violence rather than inflict it.

At Jericho, and other battles in the book of Joshua, God did what was needed to keep the promise alive.

God ultimately fulfilled that promise on a cross...and in another astounding turn of events, Christ's resurrection.

That's how the promise continues to unfold for us. The promise unfolds when we are bathed in the waters of baptism. The promise of freedom and new life unfolds when we receive the bread and the wine...Christ's body and blood. Evie will receive her first communion today.

Although she has been bathed in God's promises since her baptism, today she will experience for the first time that promise coming to her in bread and wine. God's promise unfolds for us when we hear the words of new birth and salvation. God's promise unfolds for us as we encounter suffering in others.

All that makes walls crumbling at the shout of the multitude seem a little less astounding.

But it seems it will take no less patience...maybe even more. It takes trusting that God not only can but is doing the impossible.

God asked the Israelites to march around Jericho and blow trumpets. As the trumpets blew and the marching feet shook the ground, the walls weakened, and on the seventh trip around on the seventh day, the walls crumbled.

Maybe that is a helpful image for us. God's promise unfolds through us, not with warriors, shofars and shouts, but with words that speak God's grace and love into the world...with actions that bring God's justice and peace into the world.

Each loving word or action takes a chink out of the walls that we build between people...the walls we try to build between us and God.

Slowly, bit by bit, the walls of evil weaken and crumble.