

Rev. Jerry Deck
Joshua 6: 1 – 20

November 2, 2014

Roots The Warrior Leader

Here we are again this week with a story that I remember really enjoying as a child. It wasn't the thought of going around in circles that excited me or the blowing of a ram's horn or even the talk of soldiers. No, it was the walls tumbling down. Because I loved seeing things knocked down or even better, knocking things down myself. For a while I thought this was a "boy thing" but then after having three girls I've discovered that it's clearly just a kid thing. When Shaughnessy was younger she loved to carefully build up a tower block by block and then with reckless abandon knock it all down. What was even more delightful for me to watch was to see Adeline walk around the corner, see Shaughnessy building this tower and then watching as she made a mad dash to try and knock down the tower before her older sister could.

And when I was a kid, after hearing this story told and retold, I always wished that things could work like they did for Joshua and the Israelites. I'd go around and, like a magician, pray towards walls or fences or building or my Lincoln Logs and pray that they would all of a sudden tumble down. But, alas, I was disappointed, because quite frankly things like that don't usually happen.

Which, of course, brings us to the strangeness of this story and one of the reasons why it's so important for us as adults to take a closer look at it. Because when we're kids it's easy to get caught up in the excitement of the walls tumbling down and to overlook the fact that something more is going on here. Something more than just walls falling and a battle won. Because, you see, the strangeness of what happens is really an invitation to dig in more deeply and to ask what is really going on.

Now, it doesn't start out all that strangely, does it? Israel apparently has laid siege to Jericho, which was a vital city because of how close it was to the Jordan River. This was a common tactic when it came to trying to conquer a city that had such fortified walls as Jericho. Why lose so many of your own soldiers by trying to scale these massive walls when you can just sit around and wait for those inside the walls to surrender. And then God starts talking to Joshua in order to give him the Israelites battle plan. "I've handed Jericho over to you," God says, "including its king and soldiers." Now if you're Joshua, this is exactly what you want to hear. The only question, of course, is what to do next. Keep laying siege? Scale the walls? Take a battering ram to the gate? You can imagine Joshua's great excitement as he starts taking notes.

God continues. "Take your warriors . . ." Yeah, yeah, of course. "March around the city once." Okay, march around the city. "Do that for six days." Do that for . . . what?! "Yes, that's right and make sure to have seven priests with you, blowing

their horns and carrying the ark.” (I mean if I was Joshua I probably would have stopped taking notes as soon as he said bring the priests for battles, because everyone knows what wimps we priests and pastors are!) But God’s not finished because then he tells Joshua that on the 7th day they would do the same thing but march around 7 times, then when the people hear the sound of the horns they were to let out a great shout and the walls of the city would fall flat and they could take the city. Right. So, that’s the real game plan?!

Surely this is not what Joshua had in mind. And as if this battle plan was not bad enough, Joshua had to then go out and communicate this bizarre plan to the soldiers. Now you have to picture this in your mind. You have these soldiers, guys with tons of testosterone who are ready to go and knock something over. And remember they’ve been wandering around for 40 years with nothing to do, no one to battle but themselves and nothing fun to knock down. Then, finally, at long last they have an opponent in front of them, starting with a big, fun-to-knock down wall, and Joshua says, “Okay, tag along with the priests and just walk around.” Is it any wonder at all that Joshua adds his own instruction to God’s when he tells them that they can’t speak a word the whole time they are doing this. Well, of course he doesn’t want them to say anything because if they did then surely it would have been about what a horrible, horrible battle plan this was.

And, while some scholars think that the folks inside of Jericho’s wall would have been nervous and afraid because of the Israelite’s actions, I (like *The Jesus Storybook Bible*) think they would have been laughing at them, certain that the Israelites must be afraid to actually *do* anything. What are they playing a game of “Ring around the Rosie” or something?

But go around the wall the Israelites did. Day after day after day. Until the time when they go around seven times. And then the horns blow. And I have to imagine that the space between when those horns blew and when the people shouted must have been the most anxious, fearful, exciting and nerve-wracking time of Joshua’s life. If they scream and the walls come tumbling down then the scoffing (as quiet as it may have been) would be quickly quelled, but if they scream and nothing happens, then he’d better have his horse ready for a quick getaway. But, amazingly enough, the walls do fall down, just as God said, and Jericho is the Israelites for the taking.

So, why does God choose this battle plan for Israelites at this point in their history? Well, that’s not necessarily an easy question, but there are some things that stand out in this story. First, is simply the use of the word seven. Again and again this word comes up. 7 priests, 7 trumpets, 7 days, and 7 times around the walls. 7, of course, is a number that’s used again and again in scripture and is oftentimes equated with completion or fulfillment. And when’s the first time that 7 comes up in scripture? Of course, the 7th day, when God rested. And just last week the 7th day of creation was brought up in the 10 commandments when God commands us to keep the Sabbath. So, that’s one clue. And then you have the ram horns or shofars that were blown. Now these were certainly used in battle, however, they were also used

during religious ceremonies. Ok. Interesting. Then you have the fact that the priests were there and the Ark of the Covenant was there. Then, you have the simple fact that there is this detailed language which makes it sound, quite frankly, like a ritual or a liturgy of sorts.

And if you put all of that together (the number seven and the horns and the priests and the Ark of the Covenant and the liturgical language) you begin to see that this sounds a whole lot less like something discussed between army commanders out on the battle field and a whole lot more like something discussed up in room 201 every Wednesday afternoon. That's when Scott and John and Betsy and Sally and one of the youth guys and I sit down and talk about what we're going to do on the next Sunday (i.e. the Sabbath) and when we talk about horns (ie music) and priests (ie pastors) and liturgical language (ie prayers or communion). In other words the reason why this sounds like such a strange battle plan is because it's not so much a battle plan, but a worship plan. That before they start their long awaited trek into the Promised Land God is, somewhat subversively, making them stop in order to worship. And why is that critical for Israel?

Because, as we mentioned earlier, these Israelites had been waiting so long to get out of the wilderness, to make up for lost time, to right the wrongs of their parents that there is danger, great danger, that if they simply march in and take over Jericho and then beyond that they will begin to imagine that these victories are of their own doing, their own volition, their own might, rather than what it actually is, which is a gift from God. And so, the best way to force them to see and remember that everything they have and will attain is a gift from God is to have them worship.

Last week we talked about how keeping the 10 commandments is an act of worship and we saw that when it comes to keeping the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath is and act of gratitude as we remember who we are in God and that everything we have is a gift from God. And so a part of what we do on the Sabbath is to stop our own great plans and desires in order to worship God, to remind ourselves that we aren't God and to humble ourselves in the presence of the One to whom we owe everything. Worship, as we experience it on the Sabbath, gets in our way, just as worship got in the way of the Israelites and their taking over Jericho.

And I think that's crucial in our understanding of worship. That it is supposed to get in our way of doing what we want, when we want. I'll be honest, it's pretty easy for us as church leaders to get caught up in trying to make worship as pleasant and non-obstructive as possible when in reality a crucial part of worship is that it is disruptive to everything else you're doing. That it should get in the way of your plans, your normal way of life. Because if worship does not disrupt our lives then so often it will not force us to question how we're living our lives. It will not force us to ask ourselves whether we are genuinely living as if God has given us life, as if our time and our talents are gifts and before you know it we'll be tackling Jerichos along the way, perhaps giving lip service to God, but more likely believing that who we are and where we've gone is of our own doing.

Of course, worship is about more than just how we spend our time and our talents. It is also very much about how we spend our treasure, how we spend the money, the resources that we have. And it is important for us that we understand it in this way. That the money we give to ZPC is primarily an act of worship. The reality is that so often when it comes to stewardship we frame the conversation in such a way that it seems like the reason we ask you to give to the church is to help keep the lights on, to give to missionaries and to pay our staff. And let me say, we as church leadership are very thankful that the money you give does help to do that. And we as staff are especially thankful that the money you give helps to provide shelter and food for us and our families.

And yet, as great as that is, we need to understand that giving money is, at its root, an act of worship that is supposed to shape us. Oftentimes when it comes to stewardship and stewardship season, the question that inevitably comes up is the question of how much should we give. Are we still required to tithe or did that practice end with the Old Testament? Should we base our giving on our gross intake or our net intake? While questions like that are fine, I don't think they actually get at what we really should be asking which is this: "Is the amount that we're giving, getting in the way of something else that we'd prefer to spend our money on?" "Are we giving in such a way that it's disrupting our lives?" Because if giving is an act of worship which is supposed to shape us into a people of gratitude who genuinely believe that everything we have is a gift, then the way we give simply must be disruptive. Otherwise, truth be told, we will be a people who politely fold up God's worship plan and put it in our pocket while we attempt to scale the walls of Jericho on our own.

Worship, make no mistake about it, is always costly. It costs the Israelites. It cost them time and it cost them some of their egos as they depended and trusted in God rather than their own weapons and strength. It costs us on Sunday mornings when we decide to come in here rather than doing all of the other wonderful things we could be doing. It costs us our evenings and afternoons as we decide to love our neighbors rather than just look after ourselves. It costs us our treasure and spending our money on only the things we desire when we decide to give it away for Christ and for his kingdom. It is costly.

And yet, a people who engage in costly worship are a people who grow in gratitude as they become more and more aware of how much a gift life is. We become a people who treasure time rather than flying through it. We are shaped into a community that, as we said last week, experiences freedom rather than slavery. We experience the joy of being in relationship with our neighbors instead of just waving partners. And we become a people who delight in things and possessions that God has given to us, rather than allowing those things and possessions to control us.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, may we grow in our understanding of what it means to worship through our time, talent and treasure, so that we can become a people full of grace and gratitude. May it be so. Amen.