Joshua or Bartimaeus?

21 Pentecost

October 29, 2017

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 [Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17](http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp25_RCL.html#ps1)1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 [Matthew 22:34-46](http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp25_RCL.html#gsp1)

Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negev, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’”

This passage always now makes me sad, almost unbearably sorrowful.

The book of Deuteronomy, the “Second Law,” is essentially a long speech by Moses. It’s a rewriting—perhaps a rewiring—of the Torah, or Teaching, found in Exodus and Leviticus. It’s also a retelling of Israel’s salvation history: from slavery to freedom to promise and failure to desert wandering and unimaginable hope on the horizon.

Unfortunately, it’s also Israel’s version of American Manifest Destiny: Judah as far as the Western Sea is the Great Plains; the Negev and the Plain are the Native American tribes and confederacies of the East and the South; as far as Zoar is Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

And we know what happened to the indigenous peoples in those places.

Joshua is God’s appointed successor to Moses. At the beginning of the book of Joshua, God proclaims to Israel’s warrior leader, “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses” (Joshua 1:2-3).

Soon after, when the Israelites besiege Jericho, Joshua proclaims to his fighting

men, “The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction”

(Joshua 6:17). So, divinely empowered, “the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys” (Joshua 6:21-22).

Both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

The only problem is, this didn’t happen.

Actually, it’s a good problem: it’s good that the Israelites didn’t commit small-scale genocide.

Actually, there are multiple problems here: (1) the story of the fall of Jericho is a problem if you read the Bible as if it were a textbook or a journalistic accounting of the daily horrors coming out of Washington; (2) the fall of Jericho—and the entire narrative of Israel’s capture of the Promised Land—is a problem for those of us who look to the Bible for moral bread and sustenance.

The good news historically is that through extensive excavation of Jericho, archeologists have proven that the city never experienced total destruction. Historians suggest that the people who later became Israelites were not a vast multitude fleeing Egypt but rather scattered tribes that coalesced within the land of Canaan and grew strong enough eventually to expand into a tiny empire.

There’s further bad news, though. If the fall of Jericho didn’t happen, if the slaughter of the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and the total destruction of their cities didn’t occur as the Bible proclaims, why on earth would a people create such stories?[[1]](#footnote-1) Why would they pass them down for generations and across millennia? Even more, why would they credit God for their mayhem and murder?

Imagine that you’re standing in front of a full-length mirror. The mirror, encased in the finest wood and gold, bears the title “Human History.”

Who do you see? Do you see Gandhi, dressed in a loincloth, avatar[[2]](#footnote-2) of peace? Or do you see Joshua, draped in royal finery, sword in hand, covered in blood?

Or, more likely, if we’re honest, we see both.

Some of you have heard me say that, for good and ill, better or worse, I’m a child of the ‘60s. I know almost by heart a lot of songs from the ‘60s and ‘70s. But the war in Vietnam, at least the American part, devoured thousands and thousands of God’s children from the time I was 10 to the time I was 23. I was born during the Korean War; my father flew fighter-bombers in World War II. Rock & Roll courses through my veins. And war, unceasing war, is in my DNA.

When for this sermon I read today’s reading from Deuteronomy, a deep deep sadness, a numbing sorrow, washed over me, as if I were alone, walking in the middle of nowhere in cold Tule fog.

So, where does a person of faith turn to deal with the horrific stories in the Bible?

Well . . . the Bible.

Joshua and Jericho are the flu; Jesus is the flu shot. It’s not lost on

me that we need to get a flu shot every year. Flu, like war, mutates and

spreads. But if Jesus is our inoculation,[[3]](#footnote-3) we need *that* shot every single day of our lives.

Matthew and Luke tell the story about Jesus sending the disciples out to preach the Good News. The two versions are basically the same, with minor variations.

But there is one major difference.

In Mark, Jesus orders the disciples “to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” (Mark 6:8). In other words, the disciples are to depend solely on God for their food and daily needs.

Except for that staff.

I’ve been in Egypt three times. One thing you immediately notice in the villages is the packs of wild or semi-wild dogs running free. In the ancient world, a staff protected you from wild animals, or from human assault.

So, Jesus seems very practical here: he’s teaching self-defense.

The overwhelming consensus among biblical scholars is that Matthew and Luke used a version of Mark, and then added material from other sources. Surprisingly, Matthew does not have the story where Jesus sends forth the disciples.

Luke does. Jesus tells the disciples, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money. . .”

Did you hear the difference?

In Mark, Jesus tells the disciples to take a staff for self-protection. But in Luke, he doesn’t.

Within the current methodology used to study the Gospels, it’s most likely that Jesus *did* tell his followers to take a staff. Luke changed Jesus’ words: in Luke, Jesus tells them to leave their staffs at home.

Is Luke making Jesus a pacifist? In more biblical terms, in Luke Jesus wants the disciples to trust totally—absolutely completely—in God and God’s saving grace.

I can hear Luke taking Jesus aside and saying to him, “Hey Jesus. I know why you want the guys to take a staff—but don’t you think it shows more trust in God if they don’t?”

Jesus responds, “Ol’ buddy, you’re right. My bad. Go tell ‘em to stack their staffs over here.”

Doesn’t this story exemplify *our* story?

Bluntly put: Do we trust in our weapons, or do we trust in God?

The Israelites in their sacred story about Jericho trust in their weapons—and God is their iron worker, pounding metal into warfare.

But there’s another story about Jericho. When the disciples and Jesus come into Jericho, blind Bartimaeus shouts out to Jesus: “My teacher, let me see again!” Jesus says to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus “on the way” (see Mark 10:46-52).

“Sight” is a metaphor here. Bartimaeus now, both literally and metaphorically, spiritually, sees the light. He now follows Jesus “on the way,” that is on a path of trust, faith, love, and compassion.

Which Jericho story will we inhabit?

Will we be Joshua—or Bartimaeus?

Amen.

1. See Genesis 15:21; Exodus 3:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Avatar: “a manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The etymology of “inoculate” is fascinating: “late Middle English < Latin *inoculātus*,past participle of *inoculāre*,to graft by budding, implant, equivalent to *in-*in- + *oculā-*(stem of *oculāre*to graft, derivative of *oculus*eye, bud)” (dictionary.com). So, to inoculate with Jesus is to graft Jesus on ourselves, to implant him. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)