

The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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“The Story Continues”
Joshua 3:7-17

We all like a good story. It probably starts somewhere in childhood, when we were tucked into snug beds and told stories that let our imaginations give way to dreams. My father told us stories of his cat named Trouble whose adventures and missteps explained his name. His story-telling came from his father, my Pap, who told of our great-great uncle, Frank, a vaudevillian performer who allegedly sang and performed a soft shoe routine for the likes of Al Capone. Sometimes these stories may be couched in legend as much as they are grounded in truth, but we all narratives that form our memories tucked somewhere within the stories of our lives.

As we grow up, we realize that stories are not just for the young. There are the stories we make up when we get home after curfew and there are the stories that shape our identity: of our classmates' reaction to the differences between us, stories of life growing up in a small Pittsburgh steel town, of family drama and first snowfalls. We tell stories of weddings and births, of conflict and deaths. There are the stories that we retell as we remember where we were when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, when Kennedy and King were assassinated, when Challenger exploded after take off, or when the Twin Towers were struck.

Stories are important. They shape our perspective, they inform our identity, they communicate who we are to others.

Our text for today tells us such a story, through the words of an ancient voice. Although we begin a new chapter in a new book of Scripture, the story continues the journey of the Israelites, freed from captivity in Egypt and led through the wilderness by God's prophet Moses. But Moses has died, just outside of the promised land. The leader upon which the Israelites had relied, the leader who begged forgiveness on their behalf each time they turned away, was gone. So what next? What would become of Israel without the leader God loved so well?

Our text for today continues the story of the Israelite people, equipped with a new leader: Moses' assistant, Joshua, son of Nun. Joshua is a man of strength, obedient to God's will, a skilled warrior, a present guide. Joshua is unwavering in his leadership, never waffling on his sense of call and never running from God. God exalts Joshua among the people, sets him apart as a messenger of God's will and the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people. Under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites will finally arrive at Canaan.

The call of Joshua and the plan of God is affirmed by a sign; a sign that will ignite the collective memory of the Israelites around a central event of their journey as a people; a story of God's faithfulness to Israel. Once again, God will part waters on behalf of God's people. As Moses raised his staff and parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites might flee Egypt in safety, God now parts the Jordan river so the Israelites can pass through the waters to come near to the promised land. This event reminds the Israelites, whether they were present at the first crossing or not, that the God of Moses is the God of Joshua. This God is their God, still leading them onward, still keeping promises. God's presence goes before them, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant, carried into the water by a member of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Once the feet of the priests touches the water, the waters are piled up as a heap so that the Israelites can pass through on dry land.

And so the story continues. God assures the Israelites that God is not done with them yet. God will fulfill the promise of the gift of land. God will be their God, going before them in all they do. God affirms God's love for them, providing a sign to the Israelites: that God is powerful, that the Israelites are God's people, that God is with them. As the writer of the hymn proclaims, "Life is hallowed by the knowledge God has been this way before."

Yet hidden in the middle of this poetic passage is verse 10 in which God tells Joshua that occupation of Canaan will take place by driving the indigenous people out: the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. The acquisition of the promised land will come at a cost: not to the Israelites, but to those who have made Canaan their home for years.

While there is beauty in the book of Joshua of an obedient leader dedicated to God's service, of a struggling people reaching their desired destination, of a priestly procession parting the waters of the Jordan—part of the story is full of battle, conquest, and, in truth, genocide at the hands of God's people, at the command of God.

This reality is disturbing for those of us who approach this passage with modern sensibilities. We know that our own national history is full of stories of colonists driving out, killing, and oppressing Native Americans indigenous to this land. We know too that this nation has seen systematic oppression; torture of men and women of African descent who were shackled and transported to this country on slave ships. We have seen the ravages of genocide on the nightly news even within the last century: in Nazi Germany, in Sudan, in Bosnia and Sri Lanka; the list goes on. What's more, we have seen the ugliness of wars fought in God's name, of modern-day crusades where battle and conquest have resulted in the death of innocents at the hand of warriors of many faiths claiming to do God's will through these acts of violence.

And we know that genocide and colonial occupation resulting in the oppression and murder of indigenous people is one of the ugliest form of violence there is. When one class of people does not acknowledge the full humanity of the other but rather views them as objects who stand as obstacles to a personal or political gain, we know that sin abounds. Such militaristic efforts are not just. They are demonstrations of power that abuse others.

As the story continues we are not sure that we want to find ourselves or our God in this text. We are not sure that the God of Joshua, this God who keeps promises to the Israelites at the cost of others, is the God of our hearts: a God of grace and mercy and steadfast love.

Commentators are quick to point out that the book of Joshua is a theological text, written in a specific time and place within a cultural context quite different from our own. It has been argued that the theology within Joshua is one that speaks to God's providence, faithfulness, and to the doctrine of election. Yet while it may be helpful to view this document in less of an historical vein, it is troubling theology to say the least.

The most helpful perspective I read on this matter is the perspective that reminds us that the text of the book of Joshua was not written by an external author writing objectively about historical events, nor is the work of a first person narrative, documenting their experience in a daily journey in a journal. Joshua was written by several authors over several hundred years with a finished product not likely completed until the time of the Babylonian exile. [1] "The finished product should be read in the light of the trauma of exile and the identity crises it produced." [2] This commentator goes on to say that the telling of this story does not meet the same standards for historical reporting that we hold today. The story is told through the voice of a people who are trying to establish their cultural and national identity. He writes: "Joshua must be classified as the kind of history that was written in the ancient world to trace national origins and support nationalistic goals. For Americans, the closest parallels to the kind of history we find in Joshua

might be stories of Pilgrims celebrating the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth or George Washington chopping down the cherry tree.” [3]

This story is told by a community of faith who are trying to figure out how to be God’s people, in times of favor and in times of exile. The final version of this text served as a reminder to God’s people that God hadn’t forgotten them, and would in fact provide for them and restore them again. God had done mighty deeds on their behalf, God still loved them, and God could work for them again. Even as this is a story of cultural devastation, this is a story about faith: faith in a God who keeps promises through adversity, who secures the future of God’s people even when that future seems to be lost, who never gives up.

We are shaped by story. Whether an historical account or a mythological rendering, story shapes identity and values and beliefs. Story matters to us, whether we are listening to the story of another, or whether we are crafting a story out of the truth of our personal experiences. We remember today, on Reformation Sunday, the story of Martin Luther posting his **95 Theses** on the doors of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther sought to name the abuses within the church in those days, where profit earned from the selling of indulgences distorted the theological truth of God’s grace. Luther saw that the church’s story was becoming muddled, weighted down by the heavy burdens that placed the burden on members for the guarantee of salvation for their souls. So Luther added his language to the story, a narrative corrective to try to steer the church toward a reliance on God’s grace for salvation, rather than viewing salvation as a commodity that could be bought and sold.

And we find ourselves as storytellers of our day, trying to add to the story of our faith through debates of church polity at Presbytery meetings, through church school lessons and children’s sermons, through testimonies of personal narrative that speaks of God’s grace, and healing manifest in our own lives.

We know as we sit here today that even now, too, there are abuses within our church and throughout our world. And so we hope that we continue to grow, personally and collectively, by encountering the stories of past and present in all their fullness, acknowledging troublesome passages, not shying from complexities or glossing over problematic passages. We must name the elephant in the room so that we can move forward with wisdom and love; we must be honest about abuse, we must point out injustice, and we must examine our own hearts as we tell our stories. In an age of religious, economic, and personal arrogance, we are challenged to be mindful to choose language that considers and honors others; language that is self-critical where there is violence or oppression. We must be mindful to not couch our story in words that are self-aggrandizing or exclusive, and look toward a God whose biblical initiative is ever-broadening and increasingly merciful and graciously loving.

As we consider our story, let us not forget to tell of the humility poured out in a God who became incarnate through Jesus Christ, being born as a baby to poor parents in a stable in Bethlehem, and how this Christ extends a radical hospitality to all of God’s children: to tax collectors and women and demoniacs alike. Let our story be informed by stories of grace such as these that transcend our human expectation and give witness to a God who is still at work in our lives and in our world.

In our storytelling, may we add our voices to the dialogue and claim that God’s gift of grace is available to all, freely, through faith. Where others have claimed an exclusive message, let us tell of how we have encountered, with joy, the love of a community of faith that celebrates diversity of gifts and lives, and how we are individually and collectively blessed through this richness. Let us use our words to claim that God’s kingdom vision is one in which no one should hunger or thirst or go to bed at night with the sound of gunshots outside of their window, and so may our efforts align with the work of the Prince of Peace until there is peace, justice and care for all.

The story continues, for a God who has been at work in and through humanity since our inception is with us still. God is at work: in stories of forgiveness and acceptance; in stories of exemplary strength and charity; in stories of patience and humility; in stories of courageous peacemaking and risky loving. God is at work in us. May we tell of God's presence in our midst, dwelling within us and guiding us onward. May we tell of God's presence going before us to the bedside of loved ones who lay dying, going with our children as we send them off to school, going with us to the grocery store or the doctor's office or the unemployment lines.

Today, we tell the story about how we, too, have come through the waters of baptism where by grace God has cleansed us from sin, claimed us as kingdom heirs, offered us new life. We celebrate that the story continues, among us, in us and through us. Thanks be to God.

Amen

[1] Creach, Jerome. *Joshua. Interpretation: A Bible Comentar for Teaching and Preaching*. P 11.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. p 5