

Sermon for Valleyview Mennonite Church – January 14, 2018
“In the Face of Change” Joshua 24:1-15

Let us pray: Loving and faithful God, may your spirit dwell among us as we together study your word. Amen

Let me say right up front that I do not particularly like the book of Joshua! I scanned over the first 23 chapters before looking more closely at chapter 24. It is full of slaughter and celebrations of slaughter all seemingly approved by God. I find that hard to understand.

How many of you have sung the children’s song, “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho?” The chorus goes like this, “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down.” There are many verses, here is one. “Up to the walls of Jericho he marched with spear in hand. Go blow them ram horns, Joshua cried, cause the battle is in my hands.” And then the chorus again.

Here is another verse: “They tell me great god that Joshua’s spear was well nigh 12 feet long. And upon his hip was a double edged sword and his mouth was a gospel horn. Yet bold and brave he stood, salvation in his hand. Go blow them ram horns Joshua cried cause the devil can’t do you no harm.” And then the chorus again. When we sang this as children, no one bothered to tell us what happened after the walls came tumbling down. Not a pretty story, not for children to hear and definitely not Anabaptist/Mennonite theology!

Eugene Peterson says, “For most modern readers of Joshua, the toughest barrier to embracing this story as sacred is the military strategy of ‘holy war,’ – killing everyone in the conquered cities and totally destroying all the plunder. Massacre and destruction. ‘No survivors’ is the recurrent refrain. We look back from our time in history and think, how horrible.” He goes on to say, “Joshua’s fierce and devout determination to win land for his people and his extraordinary

attention to getting all the tribes and their families assigned to their own place, is good news indeed.” So amidst the destruction, there is good news. But how do we deal with a God who seems to be so violent?

Before we move into what we can learn from Joshua 24, I want to look briefly at how we deal with OT violence and perhaps lay it to rest so that we can learn from Joshua. In the October 23rd issue of *Canadian Mennonite*, Doug Klassen from Foothills Church in Calgary deals with this very issue. Our small group discussed it at a recent meeting and found some of his insights to be very helpful.

Doug says, “For years I have not been able to reconcile the ‘kill all the Canaanites’ God that I read about in the OT and the ‘love your enemies’ Jesus that I read about in the NT. I just couldn’t get past the verses that endorse slavery, war, plunder, and genocide.” This statement caught my attention right away because I have had the same issue.

Doug tells about one of his church members who helped him rethink all of this. Apparently this man’s vast knowledge of other ancient Near Eastern cultures and the mechanism of the scapegoat was the breakthrough for him. God knew that the only way to overcome the whole violent way of the world was not to fight against it and beat it back, but to give himself up to it, to let it do its worst to him and then to overcome death itself.

Doug also says, “If God was exactly like everything that was said about him in the OT, Jesus would have appeared and been exactly like that, because we believe Jesus is God.” It seems to me that the only way we can get around all of this is to read the Bible differently than perhaps most of us have been doing. Doug says that as we read the OT, we think that God is not much different than all of the other violent gods of that time. However, “even from the beginning we see glimpses of a God who is not at all like the other gods of the region. Instead,

God is regularly spoken of as forgiving, gracious, merciful and abounding in steadfast love.” The clincher for me in this new way of thinking is this: “If Jesus is the exact imprint, the very likeness of who God is, then there can be no violence in God at all, because there was no violence in Jesus.” Reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus is basic to our Anabaptist faith and this helps us to have some perspective on these OT stories.

Peterson says that only by putting ourselves back in the culture of Joshua’s time can we really understand what was going on there. And also, Jesus provides us with a model to follow. When the Pharisees pointed out to him that scripture allows a man to very easily divorce his wife, Jesus makes the radical declaration that the law of Deuteronomy does NOT reflect God’s will but rather, it is a concession to human sinfulness. Perhaps this can also be applied to the violence portrayed by Joshua. So with these insights, let’s see what we can learn from Joshua that is relevant for us now.

If you read the whole book of Joshua, you will see that God’s people go forward looking backward. They were always pining for the way things had been as they dealt with all of the changes and challenges that this journey required of them. This is very relevant for us here at Valleyview at this juncture in our journey as God’s people. We cannot move forward if we are always looking backward. It is easy to be nostalgic and wish we could return to some other time but we cannot expect the future to duplicate the past. There will be continuity between our past and our future, but there will also be profound change.

Dan Epp-Tiessen is a professor at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg and some of you may remember him from our lectureship series a few years ago. He says that we look back because it is our story that shapes us, that reminds us of who and whose we are. This then provides guidance for

understanding what God is calling us to become. In times of change and transition, it is all the more important that we be firmly rooted in our story.

A look at scripture will show that telling the story of God's people is rarely without problems. In Joshua's version of the story, women are conspicuously absent, Joshua celebrates the massive slaughter and dispossession of the Canaanites, all actions that we cannot agree with in any way. As Christians in general, our story includes justification of horrendous evils such as slavery, colonialism, crusades against enemies, the disempowerment of women, and persecution of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. As Mennonites, looking back we see examples of shunning, the racism of residential schools, the colonialism of mission efforts, and the systems of dominance brought about by patriarchy.

When God's people tell their story, even in the Bible, it is generally a partial story. Each of us would tell the story of Valleyview in a different way. Our individual stories, even when put together with everyone else's story, give a perspective which is not always as broad and holistic as it should be. We need to carefully evaluate the story, whether it is our own version or the collective version. Unless we carefully evaluate the story, we are in danger of repeating its negative and hurtful elements.

So we must get the story right. How we tell the story shapes the actions that will result from it. In the face of change, how we look at the past has very significant impacts on how we go forward. The story of the book of Joshua is so troubling because it encourages God's people to wage holy war against their enemies and to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing. As they looked back on their history, they felt entitled to have land of their own and they went about achieving that goal by any means they could. Dan points out that several texts in Deuteronomy suggest a different way of telling the story of deliverance. These passages encourage the Israelites to remember their suffering in Egypt rather

than just the good times of plenty to eat and a place to call home. It was important for them to tell their story in such a way that it made them more compassionate towards the suffering and vulnerable people in their own midst. So we need to be careful how we tell our story here at Valleyview and also we must be honest with ourselves about what went well and what did not go well and needs to be changed. An honest look at our history will be significant in our journey forward.

But whose story is it anyway – ours or Gods? Joshua tells the story of the Israelites in a very particular way so that it focuses on God and God's saving actions. In the NT, God sends Jesus to propel this saving project forward. Everyone, all peoples of the world are invited into the new community that lives out God's story. Through this we see that the faithful telling of the story keeps God and God's grand project for the world at the center. This also reminds us that God's involvement in our personal lives and in the life of the church is not just for our own benefit but is intended to move forward God's plan for the world and all creation. We here at Valleyview are an important part of this much bigger project to save all of humanity and even all of creation.

Another very important reason to keep God at the center of the story is because we are so easily tempted to assume that the story depends primarily on our human efforts. Living peacefully, pursuing justice, sharing our resources and all other aspects of discipleship are essential to the Christian life; however, they do not begin with human effort. Discipleship means getting on board with and responding to God's redeeming and restorative activity in the world. As we look to the future, let us keep God at the center of all we do.

How will we tell our story? How will we strike the balance between looking back and looking forward? Can we trust that God will show us the way forward and help us to know what goals and priorities we need to set for our life together?

After we have told our story and after we have heard the story, we will need to decide how we go forward and whom we will serve. For the Israelites, the question was, will it be the God of whom the story speaks or the gods their ancestors worshipped on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Canaanites among whom they were living at the time of Joshua. He realizes that this is a dilemma, that they will be tempted to worship the gods of the past and also the gods of the present in their new land.

Therefore Joshua admonishes the people to go into the future absolutely clear about whom they will serve. Sorting out allegiances is a task God's people face at any time and in any place. We too are tempted to serve god's other than the God of the Bible. Some of these gods may be structures, traditions, and ways of doing things from our past. If we cling to these, we are unable to move forward. Also, some of these gods may be the values, causes, and loyalties worshipped by our society. We face temptations to value and pledge allegiance to causes that are ultimately of little significance in the overall scheme of God's plan for us.

In changing times, we are called to sort out our loyalties so that we can be totally devoted to the God who is doing new things in our day. Romans 12:2 says "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you can discern what is the will of God – what is truly good and acceptable and perfect." When we know to whom and to what we are committed, we are more able to face the changes and challenges before us. In the Bible, the story of God's people is never told simply for the sake of historical information. The story is told in such a way as to invite commitment to the story and participation in it. This is what I cherish for us as well. For example, after reading the book of Exodus, the hoped for response is not, "Isn't this an interesting story of how a band of slaves escaped from Egypt?" Rather the hoped for response is, "Wow, what an amazing story of God's

compassion and deliverance.” I pray that considering our story and how God has lead Valleyview over the years will help us to be committed to this same God as we move forward.

For all of our nearly 50 years of marriage, Alvin and I have had a plaque hanging in the entrance of our home. On this plaque is the verse from Joshua 24:15, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” This is our challenge for the future, to choose whom we will serve and what we will be involved in.

Let’s all turn in our HWB to # 725 and pray this prayer together.

God of guidance, quicken your Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds

So we may follow what is right.

Give us direction so we may know which way to choose and which to refuse;

Which course to claim and which to reject;

Which action to take and which to avoid.

Enlighten our minds, purify our hearts, strengthen our wills,

And lead us to live as faithful followers of Jesus all the days of our lives. AMEN

In closing I leave you with a few questions suggested by the writers of the material we are using for this series. What changes do you see here at Valleyview that hold much promise? What changes do you believe pose great danger? What happens when the church holds on too strongly to its story or to a particular version of its story? AMEN

“Faith and Hope in the Midst of Changing Times,” Mennonite Church Canada worship materials by Dan Epp-Tiessen and Elsie Rempel, 2010.

“A hoof and a heart both need mending,” by Doug Klassen, *Canadian Mennonite*, October 23, 2017, pp. 4-7. [The Message](#) by Eugene Peterson, pp. 271-272.

“It seemed like a good idea,” by Virginia A. Hostetler, *Canadian Mennonite*, January 1, 2018, p. 21.