

Joshua: Prophet of Conquest

Joshua 5:13—6:5, 15-16, 20

¹³ Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?” ¹⁴ He replied, “Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, “What do you command your servant, my lord?” ¹⁵ The commander of the army of the LORD said to Joshua, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.” And Joshua did so.

Chapter 6

¹ Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in. ² The LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. ³ You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, ⁴ with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great

shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and all the people shall charge straight ahead.” . . .

¹⁵ On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. ¹⁶ And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city.” . . .

²⁰ So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it.

Theme Statement

After Joshua’s strange meeting with God’s commander, the Lord directed him to capture the Canaanite city of Jericho. Even today, God’s power can remove walls when God’s people worship and work together.

Exploring the Word

Nowhere in the biblical tradition is Joshua named as a prophet. Nevertheless, the scriptures do remember Joshua as having been present when seventy elders received a portion of Moses’ spirit and prophesied (Numbers 11:24-29). Moreover, Joshua was “[filled with] the spirit of wisdom” because Moses laid hands upon him (Deuteronomy 34:9; Numbers 27:15-23). If the Bible does not explicitly name Joshua as a prophet, the tradition does remember him as the divinely designated successor to the prophet Moses.

Joshua 5:13-15 An enigmatic encounter

Joshua 5 witnesses the entire people of Israel reaffirming their covenant traditions before moving against the inhabitants of the land. Uncircumcised males born in the

Israelites' wilderness wandering were circumcised according to Yahweh's command to Abraham (5:2-9; Genesis 17:9-14). Again, and in keeping with God's command, the Israelites paused to celebrate the Passover (5:10-12; Exodus 12:1-20; Deuteronomy 16:1-8). Just when it seems the people are finally ready for action, however, the text reports Joshua's strange encounter with a representative of the Lord.

Joshua sees before him a man with a drawn sword. Is he friend or foe? The NRSV's translation "neither" dulls the negative particle "no" found in the Hebrew text. "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" The man answers, "No, I am the commander of the Lord's army. Now I have come!" (author's translation).

The man's response clarifies matters little. Certainly, as Yahweh's agent, the commander represents God's powerful authority. But whether he—and by extension, Yahweh—stands with or opposed to Joshua is not guaranteed. Neither circumcision, nor observance of the Passover, nor any other ritual obligation by Joshua's people obliges God to stand on Israel's side. God remains free. Whenever and wherever God's presence and assistance come, they do so ever by God's grace.

Joshua 6:1-5, 15-16, 20 How does a wall fall?

Most biblical scholars are convinced that the story of Jericho's destruction was not told for historical purposes. While the Bible certainly does include historical accounts, not every story that looks like a historical recollection is one. Jesus' parables, for example, often sound like historical accounts: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers . . ." (Luke 10:30). Parables remain profoundly true even if they are not historical. So too with the story of Jericho.

What is the "truth" we are to learn and hold fast? The answer emerges as we consider how the story describes the fall of Jericho's walls.

Jericho's walls fall because of a week's worth of odd parades. For six days, armed soldiers marched ahead of seven priests, each of the latter blowing a shofar (a ram's-horn trumpet). The priests, in turn, precede the ark of the Lord. The ark is the visible symbol of Yahweh's invisible presence (Numbers 10:33-36; 2 Samuel 6:1-10; 1 Kings 8:2-13). On the seventh day, the Sabbath day, the company circled the city seven times. Then, with a trumpet blast and a mighty shout, the walls of Jericho fell.

Ancient readers would have had no problem seeing the power in this parade. Trumpet blasts, shouts, the presence of the Lord with the ark moving about the city signal worship—loud, boisterous, celebrative worship. The first commandment prohibited ancient Israel from making a statue of the Lord (Exodus 20:4), and therefore moving it about the city, as did, for example, the Babylonians. But they could and did process with the ark before returning it to the temple. See Psalm 24 and, especially, 24:7-10.

The response of Israel to the gift of land was worship. The power of the Lord became palpable in worship. Devotion and worship were the center of their history and their ongoing life with God.

The Word Today

While the exact origin of the spiritual "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" is lost in time, it seems to have arisen among people who were enslaved in the antebellum American South. Rooted in a faith in the emancipating God of Moses, they celebrated the persistence of Joshua. Joshua would not stop until the walls came tumbling down. Surely

that song articulated the hope that the walls of forced servitude would likewise fall, as they finally did. Those who sang about Joshua caught a vision of what ancient Israel knew: worship of the Lord evoked a power to bring down walls.

My father learned that lesson too. For most of his life, my father held a decidedly negative opinion about gay and lesbian people. He sometimes expressed his views with rude and hurtful words. Then the Spirit led him to attend church with my sister. To his surprise, he found out, first, that many of the people surrounding him in worship were part of what we now shorthand as the LGBTQ community. Second, he found those congregants to be faithful Christians whom he quite liked. And the walls of misunderstanding came tumbling down.

Gospel power gets released in worship, unleashing the possibility that the walls of

racism will come tumbling down,
sexism will come tumbling down,
homophobia will come tumbling down,
xenophobia will come tumbling down,
injustice will come tumbling down,
loneliness, fear, grief, and indifference will come tumbling down.

Worship of God brings down every wall that is built with hate, for it is impossible to sing praises to the God of love while hating God's children (1 John 4:7-8).

Our faith does not stand or fall on the walls of Jericho. Rather, our faith stands on a Lord who becomes present to us when we gather for praise, when we receive Christ in loaf and cup, and when we are sent forth to knock down walls.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

- Circle the words that complete the following sentence:
For me, God is sometimes . . .
- | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| bossy | frustrating | mysterious |
| challenging | indifferent | threatening |
| comical | intimate | warm |
| distant | missing | welcoming |
- On a typical Sunday, how does your congregation's worship begin? Are there differences on special holidays?

Exploring the Word

- Moses was also told to remove his sandals (Exodus 3:1-6). What does that correspondence suggest about Joshua?
- Examine the pictures of Joshua's procession around Jericho, provided by your study leader. What do they have in common? How closely do they match the text?
- Explore the following passages. Put a ✓ in the box corresponding to what you discover in the passage:

Scripture	Trumpets	Shouting	Marching
Leviticus 25:8-9			
Ezra 3:10-13			
Psalms 24:7-10			
Psalms 33:3			
Psalms 47:1, 5			
Psalms 48:10-14			
Psalms 81:1-4			
Psalms 132:8-9, 16			

The Word Today

1. What walls need to tumble down in your congregation or community?
2. Examine together one or more issues your study leader will share with the group. In what ways do these issues represent a “wall”?

Closing Prayer

Lord, set us free from walls that imprison us in fear and hate. In our worship and in our daily work empower us to shout and celebrate your love until we see the welcoming walls of the new Jerusalem. Amen.

Further Study

Joshua 1; Psalm 122; 1 John 4:7-21

Daily Readings

M. Hebrews 11:23-31

F. Joshua 2:15-24

T. Luke 18:35-42

S. Joshua 6:22-25

W. Joshua 5:8-12

S. Joshua 5:13—6:5, 15-16, 20

T. Joshua 6:6-14

Memorization

Joshua 6:2

The LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers.”