

## Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

### *Sidekicks of the Bible 1: Joshua, Be Strong and Courageous*

Joshua 1:1-9; 2 and 9; 24:14-27

13 July 2008

I seem to like doing Bible sermons in the summer, perhaps because I have more time for research. This year I got the bug again, and I want to do a series on lesser-known people in the Bible. I'm sort of calling it "The Bible of the Sidekicks," but only two of these people can possibly be labeled sidekicks. These aren't the people who started the revolution, but they each contribute to the story in greater and lesser ways. Some of these names you may recognize, and others not. But like all Bible characters, they are worth knowing. So in the coming weeks we'll become acquainted with some of the folks who tend to be overshadowed by their more dazzling comrades.

And we'll start this series with the one who most closely fits the label of sidekick, Joshua. Joshua was Moses' right-hand man, his military commander, and when Moses died, Joshua became his divinely appointed successor. The Bible itself calls Moses "the servant of the Lord," and Joshua is simply, "Moses' assistant." Moses is the one who led them out of slavery, but he only brought them to the doorstep of the Promised Land. It is Joshua who took them over the threshold. I daresay you know his name, and you probably have heard of the Battle of Jericho. But that may be all you know about him. If so, don't feel bad about that!

I first got to know Joshua myself when I was in college and I read the Bible cover to cover. Joshua struck me in a very particular way at that time. My church was very involved with Israeli-Palestinian issues. My family had hosted a Palestinian exchange student, and in 1987 I went to visit her family in northern Israel, in Jesus' old stomping grounds of Galilee. In college I studied more about the modern struggle, so to read Joshua was to get a lesson in how very modern a three-thousand year old book can be. Joshua, who was commanded by God to lead the Israelites into Canaan, and furthermore to wage war against the locals: to drive them out, to defeat them utterly, to subdue every last man, woman, and child to the sword, to leave no one at all alive. This is called "the ban" in Deuteronomy and was one of the final commands of God that Moses relayed to the people. The problem is, it sounds a lot like what some folks in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict say, on both sides. There are those Palestinian groups that want to "drive the Jews into the sea," and there are those Jewish settlers who proclaim that "God gave us this land; it's ours," and the Palestinians have no right to it. In such a context, the book of Joshua is deeply disturbing to us moderns. Indeed, Joshua's example has been used to justify all kinds of genocide, pogroms, conquest and colonization over the centuries.

So I was a bit nervous about preaching on him for this sermon. Fortunately I found a great guide in Jerome Creach's commentary in the Interpretation series, and I learned that to use Joshua to justify violence is to abuse it and misunderstand its message. I found so much great material in Creach's book that I can't possibly put it all in one sermon, so I'll try to hit the highlights and explore just how much we can learn from this brutal and bloody book.

And the first and most important thing to know about Joshua is that it is not a book about military conquest, genocide, or the establishment of a nation. Rather, it is about faithfulness to *torah*. Now let's back up a minute and recall the story so far. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, and God raised up Moses to lead them to freedom. God made a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai where they were given the Ten Commandments, and then they wandered in the Sinai Peninsula for forty years.

But how do slaves become a free people? It takes time. It takes a journey. They need to be reformed into something new or else they'll just perpetuate all the bad things they knew in Egypt. Why did they spend forty years in the desert? So that no one who had been born in Egypt would step into the Promised Land. That whole generation had to pass away, and a new generation for whom slavery was history and not memory could enter the land. (Barack Obama)

So the book of Joshua begins with the slave generation gone, and this new generation of wanderers standing on the threshold. And we hear this instruction from God to Joshua: 1:1-9.

“Be strong and courageous,” God says, over and over again, and such words make sense to someone about to enter battle. Except here's the thing: God isn't talking about battle. Battle is a non-issue. God has already given them the land, and actual warfare is almost an afterthought. If you think about the Battle of Jericho as an example, their strategy was to march around the walls for seven days and blow their horns. It's not a military strategy at all. I can't imagine General Petraeus suggesting that approach for dealing with Iraq! (Though they've tried everything else, maybe it would work?) If you think about it, the procession with the *torah*, and the blowing of horns sounds more like a religious ritual, and that's in fact what it is. That's what Joshua and the people need to be strong and courageous for, not battle, but to follow *torah*. “Act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or the left so that you may be successful wherever you go.”

Now, we Christians tend to have a negative view of *torah* as a rigid set of rules dictating what food you can eat and which dishes you should use. But that's not what *torah* is. *Torah* is the way, the wisdom and justice of God. If you recall my series on Genesis and Exodus from two years ago, how God chose Abraham saying, “I chose him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” In Egypt we see how horribly humans can be when left to their own devices, when they harden their hearts against God. But in the exodus, God is showing the world what God's way looks like, characterized by justice and righteousness. That's what *torah* is: God's way. As Christians, we follow *torah* too, as Jesus said, that the sum of the law is to love God and love our neighbor. That's why the old generation had to die off. That's what Joshua's task is, to prepare the people and the land to become a new society based on *torah*.

This issue of preparation, then, is why Moses instituted the ban in Deuteronomy 20:16-18: “In the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breaths. Completely destroy them...as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.” Just as the slave generation had to die, so the people living in Canaan need to be wiped away, to make the land a clean slate. But that's the problem: there were people already living there. As when Europeans arrived in the so-called “New World,” there were people already there. As when the modern state of Israel was created, there were people already there. Can it be that our God could command such genocide? We recoil in horror, and rightly so. But even amidst the bloodshed in Joshua, we see that the Bible writers themselves struggled with exactly these issues, and we learn that to live by *torah* is not to be a literalist. (Joshua 2 and 9)

Now the ban is supposed to be total. The Israelites were commanded not to spare anyone or make peace with anyone. Yet in both these cases, God allows the exception. Israel is not punished for doing so, and in fact the text notes that their descendants continue to live in peace in Israel “to this day.” The Gospel of Matthew even lists Rahab as one of Jesus' ancestors! Furthermore, both cases – especially the Gibeonites – use trickery to get their foot in the door. It's like a battle of wits, and the fact that they outwit the Israelites is seen in their favor. But more to the point, what spares them is their respect for the God of the Israelites. They have heard of God's power, they read the writing on the wall, they know the

Israelites are going to win, so they seek to ally themselves with them. We could even interpret it that they have heard of God's righteousness and justice, and they appeal to those qualities in order to spare themselves and their families. They do not actually convert to Judaism, but they do align themselves with this new society of the Israelites. And the bond works both ways, for when neighboring kingdoms later seek to attack the Gibeonites, the Israelites come to their defense.

These stories speak to a more merciful God than the ban would imply. They also show a non-fundamentalist, non-literalist view of scripture. From a literalist perspective, Joshua should have been condemned for sparing them. But as Creach says in his commentary on these stories, "The word of God is understood as dynamic. It has theological intentions that must be treated with utmost seriousness, but it does not and cannot account for every circumstance that may arise. The people of faith must appropriate the word afresh in each new situation, open to the Spirit's leadership into new trust based on the word."

Now there are still some problems with these stories. I can't help but be reminded of the Spanish conquistadors reading a Latin confession of faith to the Indians, and if they agreed they would be spared to become slaves, and if they didn't they were killed. But it shows us that scripture has to be interpreted, that mercy is the overarching rule, that purity is not racial or ethnic or even religious, but rather about spirituality and justice.

The Rahab and Gibeonite stories further indicate that the conquest of Canaan was neither as quick nor as absolute as the book of Joshua implies. Rather, as the very next book Judges demonstrates, the Canaanites continued to live in the land up to the present day, and the Israelites had plenty of opportunity to mess things up. But Joshua paints an idealized picture in order to make a point. The book itself was written down at the time of exile, when the people no longer had the land. It served to remind them that the land had been a gift from the beginning, and that what really mattered was the covenant between God and the people. This is the point that is made so beautifully in the last chapter of the book, where we find this remarkable exchange between Joshua and the people: 24:14-27.

Joshua starts out by citing the history of all that God has done for Israel, from Abraham on up through the exodus and the present time, and then he presents them with a choice, a free choice: choose this day whom you will serve – the gods you knew in Egypt who oppressed you, the gods of the Canaanites who sought to destroy you – or the God of Abraham and Sarah who has saved you. We must ask the same question of ourselves: which god will we serve?

Of course, the correct answer is obvious: the LORD God! Except wait a minute, says Joshua. You may know what the "correct" answer is, but that doesn't make it easy. You can't serve the Lord, he tells them. God is holy. God is jealous. God won't put up with your garbage, with your half-hearted obeisance, with you saying one thing and doing another, preaching peace but practicing injustice. You can't serve God, says Joshua, because God's demands are absolute. You *will* mess up. You *will* offend God. You *will* make God angry.

But the people insist, "No, we will serve God." Not because they are sure that they will manage such a mighty task, but because the fact of a God who has shown them such grace and mercy, a God whose righteousness and justice are so much greater than what mortals can conceive or achieve – in the face of such a God, how can we not respond but in awe and gratitude and obedience? Not because we are worthy, but because this is a God who deserves our obedience and our loyalty, however imperfect we may be. And for this decision, this choice, we need to be very strong and very courageous. Choose this day, says Joshua. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.