

JOSHUA RENEWS THE COVENANT

Joshua 24:1-15

PENTECOST 21

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Vayehi aharei mot Moshe eved adoshem (After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord), *vayomer adoshem el Yeoshoua ben Nun mesharet Moshe leemor.* (the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, saying, “My servant Moses is dead).”

Thus begins the narrative of the sixth book of the Hebrew scriptures and the first of eight to be named after their main character.

The Book of Joshua is as stark as it is surprising.

From the Book of Exodus onward, the last four books of the Torah have been dominated by one great human figure — Moses.

For forty years, Moses had been the leader, the constant factor, the mediator and deliverer of his people — always there, the only person ever to speak face to face with God “*as one speaks to a friend*” (Ex. 33:11).

It must have been almost impossible to imagine life without Moses, much as today’s Brits would find it hard to imagine their country without Queen Elizabeth II, after 66 years on the throne.

However, the announcement “*Moses, my servant is dead*” begins the book that serves as today’s Narrative Lectionary reading.

As we are all painfully reminded after a loved one’s death, life, as always, must go on.

These words are spoken to *Yeoshoua*, or Joshua, as we know him.

Joshua, the son of Nun, was by no means a young man.

He was at a stage of life in which his major life’s accomplishments were ahead of him.

These words were not unexpected.

They were like the starting pistol to a race that Joshua had known for a long time that he would run, and for which he had been trained and prepared by Moses to win.

But these words must have also come with awesome demand and challenge.

They must have surely provoked that mixture of excited anticipation and inner panic we all come to know when we stand on the threshold of a new chapter of our life's journey.

“Now, therefore, arise, go over the Jordan, you and all these people”(1:2).

The time had come to enter the land, to possess in reality all that their Covenant Lord had promised Israel for centuries.

God first told Abraham: ***“And I will give to you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God”*** (Gen. 17:8).

So, who is this man, Joshua, who was given the mantle of Moses, and the task of conquering the land of Canaan?

Joshua enters God's story of salvation unannounced and unheralded.

All of a sudden, Moses appoints Joshua to lead a special operations unit — Israel's first — to repel an enemy attack.

From that moment on, the two men are inseparable.

They are almost like teacher and disciple, father and son.

Fewer biographical details are available about Joshua than most Biblical figures.

We see him only when he is in the limelight, when called upon to perform a specific task.

We know he was the son of Nun, and an Ephraimite, or from the tribe of Ephraim.

We do not know his mother's name.

However, we do know the meaning of Joshua's name — ***Yeshoua*** — “the Lord saves.”

When Moses sent representatives from each tribe to scout the land of Canaan, Joshua was among them.

We do know Joshua as the fiercest of warriors and the most victorious general in the Bible.

It is no wonder that his name appears in West Point's Hall of Fame as a foremost strategist and field commander.

To read the Book of Joshua is like reading Julius Caesar's Gaelic Commentaries, detailing the strategies and describing the battles that won both men great victories.

While the Book of Joshua is a historical account of the Israelites' conquest of Canaan, or the Promised Land, it contains some vital messages.

The theological message of the Book of Joshua is twofold:

God's Word is truthful and authoritative; and

The fulfillment of God's promise of land and a great nation is coming to pass.

The Book of Joshua is critical to the unfolding revelation of God, contained in the "Great Story" — that is, Genesis through II Kings in the Hebrew scriptures.

The Book of Joshua is divided into five sections.

- 1) Claiming of the Land
- 2) Conquering the Land
- 3) Distributing the Land
- 4) Living in the Land
- 5) Resting in the Land

There are six major themes that are prominent throughout the Book of Joshua.

The first is God's Word, which gives special attention to the instructions of Moses, especially the Torah or teachings.

Success is dependent on the people's observance of the Law of Moses, and not by military competence.

Next is the prominence of the 'covenantal' relationship God formed with the Israelites at Sinai, which is evident in every section of the Book.

Essential to appreciating the message of Joshua is the spiritual understanding of holiness.

The words holy, sanctified, and consecrated remind readers that the Israelites have been 'set apart' by God to be God's people.

Another major theme is the land itself, by which continued occupation will be qualified by the Israelites' obedience to the Covenant.

Along these lines, unity is dependent on the people's allegiance to their Covenant Lord.

Submission to the Covenant is the ideological glue that transcends tribal differences.

Another major theme and concern is leadership.

Joshua, like Moses, is "*a servant of the Lord.*"

We also see this in Joshua's New Testament namesake, Jesus. God, however, is the Israelites' ultimate leader, whose appointed leaders and later, kings, serve only to carry out God's will and commands. When these such leaders disobey God, disaster seems to follow. The highest accolade given to Moses was that he was ***"a servant of the Lord."*** The idea of leadership as service is fundamental to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and explains why humility is the highest virtue of a leader. Moses, we are told in the Book of Numbers, was ***"very humble, more so than anyone else on earth"*** (Numbers 12:3).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Put it well:

"Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve."

It is the cause we dedicate ourselves to, and the people we serve that lift us, not our own high estimate of ourselves.

Leadership begins by taking responsibility.

When we see something wrong, we can complain, or we can act.

Complaining does not change things — action does.

For Joshua, he, like Moses, was called to action.

Leaders work with people who are strong where they are weak.

They do not feel threatened by people who are better at some things than they are.

On the contrary, they feel strengthened by them.

When Joshua became the newly appointed leader, he thought constantly of his illustrious predecessor.

He was not sure of himself, or of his own virtues and merits.

Would he be able to meet God's expectations and the peoples' expectations of him?

Would he prove himself able to continue the work that only a Moses could begin?

The tasks that Moses accomplished were great.

He led the Jews out of slavery and bondage in Egypt, and brought them to the Promised Land.

It was as great a challenge to lead a new generation of free Israelites, as it had been to lead the last generation of former slaves.

And it was a major task to form this people into a force that could conquer a settled land.

The admonition, ***Hazak veematz***, ***"be strong and courageous"*** is repeated three times in the first chapter of Joshua — twice by God, and once by the people.

God strengthened Joshua's self-assurance by promising him all that God had ever promised Moses, and more.

Moses had adversaries, even enemies.

Joshua did not.

God promised him, "***No one will ever dispute your authority.***"

What an advantage for a leader to lead without opposition, intrigues, and plots.

Such an impossible gift could only be given by God.

God reminds Joshua of past pledges and covenants:

"This land is yours, Joshua."

All this is yours.

You will be the one to fight Israel's great territorial wars, and you will win them."

In today's reading, we come to the end of the story of Joshua and the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land

In fact, we are well after the period of invasion and warfare.

It reads in the previous chapter, "***a long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel and Joshua was old and well advanced in years***" (23:1).

For the last time, Joshua stands before all the people and speaks to them like a prophet.

He lists all the mighty acts that God had accomplished from the time of Abraham, through the conquest of the Promised Land.

The question that remains for the people, then, is how they will remember their history, and whether the history of God's acts will be the basis of their identity going forward.

Beloved people of God and Grace Lutheran Church,
that was a great moment in the history of Israel.

Today we have before us a moment to remember our history as a people who serve and give generously to others.

Last year at this time, and for the first time, we dedicated an entire offering to the ELCA Disaster Relief Fund, to help flood victims in Texas.

This morning, we are taking another such leap in faith and dedicating today's offering to the ELCA Disaster Relief Fund to provide relief for the victims of Hurricanes Florence and Michael, who have lost everything.

Like the Israelites before us, we, too, have a choice.

This morning we are being asked to serve God by serving others.

Hopefully, like Joshua, we can say individually and congregationally, "**as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.**"

AMEN