

October 19, 2014 “Joshua....Jericho” Joshua 5:13-15

As the brief portion I read to you from Joshua opens, the siege of Jericho is about to begin. The battles for the “Promised Land” are in full swing. Everyone understands what this is about. Having left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, who was led by God, the Hebrews are about to find their new home. The process is not just about war and battles and heroes it is also about identity. The Hebrew people are about to become the nation, Israel. And it is going to be a continual question thereafter, as to whether to depend on God, the sovereign God, or policy, and people.

There is no question that Joshua was a man of faith. I would never hesitate to say a man of great faith. But for all his faith, he remains a man. Given what he has witnessed under Moses, leadership, and since that time, there are clearly moments in which he wrestled with all the problems and some of the questions that confront us. There are moments when he is absolutely certain that he sees through a glass darkly. His instincts are sound. He is a believer as well as a general. But there are moments when is not sure what to do next, when he is not sure what is happening, when he can hardly believe his eyes!

In verse 13 this marvelous and strange thing occurs. Joshua is approaching Jericho. He knows it is going to take time

to capture the city. He knows that the longer a siege goes on, the more difficult it will be to keep his own people and the troops under his command focused on the task at hand. Because the task at hand is a thoroughly current kind of problem. He and they have to take a walled city. They have to take a city that has had time to prepare for their coming, time to prepare for the imminent siege. And time means, the siege is going to last a while. And in the midst of all the practical difficulties and decisions, choices and alternatives, Joshua is supposed to remain faithful. The task of taking Jericho is hard enough. The task of remaining faithful as he leads that assault, as he commits men and resources to battle, as he spills blood.....well, it multiplies the difficulty of remaining faithful. That is what is thoroughly current about this episode. It begs the question, how do you do the job and remain a person who serves the holy God? It is a thoroughly modern question.

Here are some encouraging things that we find in the episode. The very first is that Joshua is not superman. He is not even certain. He looks up and there in front of him like a scene out of an old western movie stands a man, who has drawn his sword and is literally blocking the way to Jericho. The man's drawn sword is in his hand. He is obviously ready to do battle. But with whom? How does this duel on the road, this personal combat fit into what God has commanded Joshua to do? He doesn't know! His first question to this stranger is,

“Are you for us, or for our enemies?” I draw this encouraging insight. There are moments when we are simply trying to get on with what we are to do, and what we are to do with and for God, when uncertainty is what fills our minds. At this point Joshua has more questions than answers. He doesn’t know this individual. He doesn’t know where he came from, or how he got here. Joshua does not know where the allegiance of this stranger lies. Uncertainty. Questions. Numbers of questions. There are times when the endeavour to faithfully pursue the will of God leads us directly onto that kind of field. Questions, doubt, uncertainty is often part of the experience of trying to obey the Lord our God.

This armed and obviously ready to rumble warrior, Joshua asks the question, “Are you here to help us, or are you to challenge us on behalf of the city of Jericho, its leaders and its occupants?” The answer to that question is not only revealing, it is marvelous. “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” To the man, the woman, the young person who is trying to live out the life of faith in God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the God who is everywhere in the person of the Holy Spirit, the Scripture says, be prepared to meet God’s angels, God’s messengers, those who come to the place and the time mysteriously, as if indeed from heaven, in the midst of the journey.

It is rather easy to conclude this is an angel of God. He comes bearing a message. And it is a message Joshua needs to hear. He may be uncertain about his own abilities as a General. He may be uncertain about his ability to inspire loyalty over the long haul among his troops. He may be uncertain as to how the capture of a walled and provisioned city can be accomplished. The point of the message is that Joshua is not in command. That this battle is in effect not Joshua's. He will play a part and it is a significant part in fact. But the message is that God is engaged here at Jericho. That God's commander is on the field and seen to be on the field. Joshua is not alone. And more importantly Joshua's insights, intelligence, his strategy and force of arms are not going to be the deciding factor in the siege and the ultimate fall of Jericho.

When I was young and endeavouring to be an entertainer, one of the songs, one of the spirituals that made its way into our repertoire was "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. And the walls came a tumbling down." Nice idea! But the fact is that is not what the Scripture teaches is it! They are still arguing over what actually brought down the walls of Jericho. One theory goes, an opportune and timely earthquake. The Scripture says in chapter 6 that the Lord told Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands. Jericho's king, and all its fighting men." And this before the first blast of the trumpet,

before the first group marched around the city, and before the first shot was fired. We are told here with more clarity than we like to admit...that miracles happen. That angels appear and deliver the messages of God to those who would hear them. And that some battles are won, before they ever begin, because God is an active participant in the lives of His servants.

I said Joshua is a faithful servant. I also said there was a moment there when he had more questions than answers. A moment when he was uncertain about the future. A moment when he was uncertain about how the whole affair would play out. It is tempting to say he was thinking too much. I am encouraged that thinking too much, uncertainty, questioning can be part of the adventure of a faithful leader and can lead to a moment of confirmation, and worship. On the way by notice the specific answer made by this angelic commander. "Are for us, or for our enemies?" The reply is, "Neither!", neither. This is not about being for the Israelis, or the occupants of Jericho. It is about revealing the presence of God to those who would deny his presence, ... as well as those who are uncertain.

Joshua's response. "Joshua fell face downward in reverence, and asked him, 'What message does my Lord have for His servant?'" Wow! And just that quick, perhaps faster, the man of faith recognizes he is in God's presence, that is indeed God's messenger come to minister to Joshua and the troops.

He falls farther than his knees because he knows where he has been in his doubts and questions, his uncertainty. But he also knows how to behave in the presence of the angel, Joshua knows. The commander of the Lord's army, the KJVersion calls him, the commander of the Lord's host, not just the troops on the ground or the people whom Joshua leads, but the Legions of Heaven! The commander says, Joshua here is what you really need to hear. Take off your shoes. This is holy ground. And Joshua took off his shoes.

Implications? God has stood where Joshua was standing for some time before Joshua got there with his so called army. The siege of Jericho is over before it began. Yesterday was in God's hands. Today is in God's hands. Tomorrow is in God's hands. When by force of will, or God's reminding us those facts become clear, there is only one thing left to do. Joshua did it. He took off his shoes and he worshipped God. It is not about a fortified city. It is not about the strength or the strategy of Jericho's leadership. It is all about the fact that God is with His people, and those who serve them.

Let us pray....

Lord God Almighty. We thank you for moments when we remember these things. That you were here

yesterday. That you are here today. That you will be here tomorrow. Our problem is indeed that we worry about the thickness of the walls, and the provisions that have been stored up, Most of all we remember our own weakness. Help us to remember today, tonight, tomorrow, when we are engaged in stuff we can see and hear and smell, that you are still the one who made all that is. That you are the one who has called us to serve you and your will. Help us to pause and collect ourselves and do what is our best work...