

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on March 30, 2025

[Joshua 5:9-12 / Psalm 32 / 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 / Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

*May my words be acceptable to God; faithful to the teachings of Christ;
and inspired by the Holy Spirit; that we may be blessed by the same Triune God.*

So...we have a bit of a moral conflict. The Bible and our Judeo-Christian history are full of moral conflicts. These conflicts are aspects of faith that we could simply ignore, but like conflicts in our personal lives, ignoring them never really works and sometimes makes them worse.

The Old Testament Reading from Joshua is beautiful and full of hope as these 4 sentences stand alone:

God has rolled away the disgrace of Egypt from the Israelites.

The Israelites kept the Passover – their most important religious observance to this day – in Gilgal.

The manna finally ceased. It was no longer needed because:

They ate the produce of the land of Canaan that year.

After 40 years, the Israelites had finally landed in the Promised Land. They could now rest and give due thanks to God.

But they didn't.

Just one short paragraph later begins Chapter 6 of the Book of Joshua. It is the beginning of the occupation of the Land of Canaan.

The Lord said to Joshua, 'See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. ... 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.'

...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. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

They burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.

And that goes on for 6 chapters until:

Joshua took all that land: the hill country and all the Negeb and all the land of Goshen and the lowland and the Arabah and the hill country of Israel and its lowland, from Mount Halak, which rises towards Seir, as far as Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon. He took all their kings, struck them down, and put them to death.

Joshua came and wiped out the Anakim from the hill country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel; Joshua utterly destroyed them with their towns. ... So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel.

Whichever way you read it, the majority of the Book of Joshua is God-sanctioned genocide. This is part of our history as Christians. This is one of our moral conflicts.

We never hear this on a Sunday morning. The Book of Joshua shows up in the Sunday Lectionary only 4 times in the 3-year cycle. All of them focus on the

promise of this land. We are never challenged on a Sunday morning about this fundamental moral conflict in our history.

This morning, we have the brief celebration of the Passover. But the next 6 chapters of destruction have often been used as an ideology around claims to foreign lands and the legitimacy thereof. Three facets of such an ideology, which have been extracted, amalgamated and weaponized throughout the centuries, are:

The other residents of the land – usually natives – are dehumanized, characterized as inherently evil. In many instances, these residents don't follow YHWH, and the invaders claim that it's either YHWH or the highway. This eventually leads to the legitimization of violence and massive brutality "without caution or embarrassment", as one commentary put it. The violence is justified as God's mission, and God wants the enemies destroyed – it's YHWH or the highway.

Once the dehumanization of the residents, and their destruction and submission through violence ordained by God is complete, God's vision for and promise to the invaders is Mission Accomplished.

Now, if this sounds familiar, it should. This ideology was used to legitimize the Crusades. This ideology was used to legitimize the colonization of The Americas for 400 years. This ideology was used to legitimize the colonization of Africa and parts of Asia. And so on.

The ideology is not unique to those of Judeo-Christian heritage. Dehumanizing enemies and legitimizing violence in order to subjugate peoples and commandeer lands has been utilized all over the world, in both large and small ways.

But of course, we are now enlightened, and this sort of ideology doesn't get employed anymore, at least not by European nations and the United States. Right? Of course not!

One of my commentaries had this to say about the Book of Joshua:

This sentence of destruction on a population, civilian and non-aggressor, and expressly commanded by YHWH, presents the greatest moral difficulty in the book for modern readers.¹

While that is certainly true, we must also have moral difficulty with this ideology that we are still perpetuating. The same ideology exists today in the United States, perhaps not so strongly tied to the Will of God. Referring to immigrants and people with brown and black skin as “*poisoning the blood of our nation*”, to immigrants as murderers with “*bad genes*” and opponents as the “*enemy within*” are all ways to dehumanize whole groups of people, whole cultures, anyone who is not like the aggressor. And it’s important for us to pay attention as the grip of the White Supremacist Christian Nationalists gets stronger and stronger on our country. We need to develop the skills to respond and to turn errant thinking back toward the love of neighbor as commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The dehumanizing propaganda in the time of Joshua was much easier to achieve without the information we have today that there is nothing substantially different in the genetics between the different races – or as we should be referring to: people of different skin colors. Our biblical mandate – regardless of what is in the Book of Joshua and in spite of it – is to love all humankind as ourselves. Modern science strengthens our theological understanding so that we can live out the Gospel. ... Yet, we choose to ignore that information and the mandate when it is convenient or when we feel vulnerable.

This type of ideology, using God’s Will or some sort of other excuse of superiority, is hard to dismiss when we feel entitled or threatened. And it contradicts our other values. Many of us value strong local and national communities, diversity,

¹ Oxford Bible Commentary

egalitarianism, social mobility, meritocracy, and we are generally humanitarian in our beliefs. One author writes:

Clearly an overt policy of violence and rejection is no viable matrix for a community of sharing. It is this deep contradiction between the brutalizing violence of Yahweh and the Torah provisions of Yahweh for justice that lie at the heart of biblical faith. It is evident that Israel is aware of this contradiction, but it remains pervasive throughout the text in any case.²

And the same can be said of us today. We claim a system of morals and values that would not support genocide, but we stray away from what we know is right. So, we defy our own values and become a bit like the Elder Son in today's Gospel reading, who believes himself to be treated unfairly. He justifies his anger. He has no concern for his brother. He feels threatened and vulnerable, so he lashes out.

Why should we be giving all our resources to this lazy boy? He is disobedient and has bought prostitutes; he will take my job, and he is dangerous, and you just opened the border and let him in!

But getting angry and justifying why I am more important than another never works for very long.

So, what do we do with the invasion of the Land of Canaan as part of our Judeo-Christian history? Conveniently, the violence and genocide have been removed from our Lectionary, so we can ignore it. But I won't let us ignore what makes us uncomfortable. Wrestling with the uncomfortable helps us reject and counter dangerous ideologies and turns us toward restoration in Jesus Christ. And today's Gospel shows us that.

² A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. Like every story and all of Jesus' parables, we can learn so many different ways to live a holy life just by looking at each parable a little differently. The joy of Jesus' parables is that there is always a God/Heaven/Kingdom figure and there is always a human figure. And that human figure can be you as an individual, us as the St Stephen's Family, or the society we live in and in which we exert influence through our words, money, votes and actions.

The central message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is that as individuals, as a Church Family and as a society, we can turn back to what God's Will really is, and that is to live together in love and charity, in peace and harmony, to learn from one another, and to look out for one another – the be a community of sharing! When we see that we are living out this unholy ideology of dehumanizing groups of people and suggesting, committing, or permitting violence toward them in order to advance our own purposes, we can turn back to God's ways, and we can be reconciled. We are told in 2 Corinthians:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

We are entrusted with not only the message of reconciliation, but the *work* of reconciliation. As our previous Bishop Mary told us, the Church is the only organization whose primary objective is reconciliation. As Ambassadors for Christ, we must learn from our wretched past – however often it was repeated – and work toward a reconciled and loving future.

This requires Relational Courage: the kind of courage it takes to be in relationships that may take work. Living peacefully among groups of people who are different from yourself, with whom you struggle to find any commonality, and whom you believe to be less than yourself cannot be justified by your faith, even with the Book of Joshua. Instead, you can employ the Relational Courage it takes

to reach out to those in need, embrace those who are not like you, and practice God's Way of Love. Beyond the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus shows us that we *must* welcome those who are not like us. In His parables, Jesus uses those who have been dehumanized to make His point that Love is the way:

The Good Samaritan

The Canaanite Woman whose daughter had a demon

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

The Tax Collectors

The Adulterers

The Untouchables

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus shows His love to them all. As Christians, we follow Jesus, not the Pharisees and the Scribes. As Jesus' followers, no person or peoples are to be dehumanized, violence used against them or our desires placed above their needs.

The Bible presents many moral conflicts. Let's address these moral conflicts and learn from them so that we do not repeat them. Let us be agents of the reconciliation that Christ has given to us.