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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, January 31, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

I Did It My Way

Joshua 5:13-15; 6:1-16, 20-23, 27

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Frank Sinatra, in his top hit *My Way*, sings a ballad that is completely focused on self and narcissistic accomplishment, regardless of the consequences. Many live their lives this way. But that should not be the case for followers of Jesus.

“And now the end is here and so I face the final curtain.”¹ Oh, I am sure that some of the Israelites thought the end was near. But not Joshua; he believed God. The placing of the ark of the covenant front and center was crucial. The living promise that binds Yahweh to the people and them to their God stood at the water’s edge with the people.

Joshua resisted the voices of the majority report, those spies that believed the people on the other side of the Jordan would be too great a match. For the ancient Hebrews and for us, faith then becomes critical. Faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”² Faith is being willing to venture with God, blindfolded.

According to *My Way*, the life philosophy promoted is one of being a self-made man. “For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he is naught.”³ Joshua didn’t handle crossing the Jordan River on his own. He did not do things his way. God made it clear to Joshua that this was to be an opportunity to experience God’s power. “When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go.”⁴ Joshua believed. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

They had crossed over the Jordan River some two million strong. Joshua was told by God that Jericho

¹Paul Anka, *My Way*.

²Hebrews 11:1

³Paul Anka, *My Way*.

⁴Joshua 3:3-4

would be delivered in the hands of his people. As Joshua neared Jericho he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua asked him, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither, but as commander of the LORD'S army I have come." Immediately Joshua fell down to his knees in reverence. The commander of the LORD'S army said, "Take off your sandals; you are on holy ground." And Joshua did.

God commanded Joshua, "Command seven priests with seven trumpets of ram's horns to walk before the ark. For six days circle the city once. On the seventh day, tell the priests to march around the city seven times blowing their trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the people give a loud shout, then the wall of the city will collapse and every man shall go straight in." So Joshua did as he was commanded by the LORD and called all the people together, giving them instructions on how to storm the city of Jericho.

Jericho was situated in fertile territory, with fresh water springs and other amenities. It was located in the wide plain of the Jordan valley about 7.5 miles northwest of the north shore of the Dead Sea and just east of the mountains of Judea. It was the epitome of Canaanite strength and invincibility. It was a mighty fortress with walls up to 25 feet high and six feet thick. It gave inhabitants a strong sense of security as enemies were repeatedly stymied during times of conflict. Once behind the walls of the city, residents were safe. But the Canaanites had spawned the wrath and judgment of God with their idol worship and evil practices. They were essentially a stronghold of rebellion against God, and the LORD promised his people that he would give them the new land.

Joshua commanded the people as God commanded him. It was a bright, sunny day. The sky covered the fertile plains of Jordan like a blue canopy as brown, sculpted mountains of Judea peered down on the green, rolling valleys. It was a great day to claim a victory. The priests had already marched once around the city each of the six days and the people of Jericho were startled and frightened.

The Canaanites braced themselves for the inevitable. Military garrisons had been called up on the northern, southern and eastern flanks of the city walls. Reinforcements were dispatched from the outposts of the northwest portion of the city, as troops marched frantically to entrench themselves in their positions. Swords were brandished and sharpened. Shields and bows were passed among the troops. A large stone-throwing device was positioned on the northwest corridor of the wall.

The priests began their slow march on the seventh day. God had told them to circle the city seven times on the seventh day. The Canaanites were baffled, perplexed, even astounded by this unorthodox military maneuver. The priests circled the city, carrying the ark of the covenant, while other priests with ram's horn trumpets led. Circle one.

Circle two. Circle three. Circle four. Circle five. Circle six. And then circle seven. After the seventh circle around the city, the priests blew as hard as they could on their ram's horn trumpets and the people released one long, continuous shout and the walls fell to the earth in one loud crash. The people in Jericho were shocked and dismayed. As the walls came down, Joshua shouted to the people to charge the city and to spare no one.

What was the real purpose of this conquest? First, God chose different leaders for the conquest of Jericho by using the clergy to lead the battle. God wanted it perfectly clear that the people's victory depended on spiritual leadership. Here God allowed the people to claim victory by relying on the priests to lead them. The clergy led the battle carrying the ark of the covenant. The clergy blew the trumpets. The clergy had a primary role in winning the war. God had anointed the clergy to take an important role in this victory. God's spiritual plan took precedence over the military plan. The military leaders had to rely upon the spiritual leaders for direction and impetus. God wanted it this way, for God knew how inclined the people were to disobey their leadership, as in the case of Moses. God had to re-establish the authority of the clergy if the people were to enjoy success in the new land.

Second, God chose different weapons for conquest by using songs, trumpets and shouts to bring down the walls of Jericho. Just as God used the clergy to lead the battle, God used entirely different weapons as instruments to claim the victory. Not swords, slingshots, daggers or rocks, but hymns, trumpets and shouts.

Third, the people had spiritually prepared themselves for battle. The Canaanites were stunned by the battle strategy because nothing in their religious practices or spirituality prepared them for the impossible. Their religion could not mentally, spiritually or physically prepare them to accept miracles or to be utilized in miraculous ways. You recall that in Joshua 3:5, Joshua exhorted the people to consecrate themselves and concentrate on God's word, for God would do amazing things. The Israelites' spiritual instruction and diligent preparation through prayer, scripture study, fasting and cleansing had put them in the right frame of mind.

Nothing is worse than a community which has all the potential for outstanding success but which throttles itself through inadequate spiritual preparation. We have seen time and again the long litany of dismal human failure where individuals who have all the promise and power to do great things sell themselves short or fall shy of their mark because of inadequate preparation. They have low expectations of God and thus have low expectations of themselves, because they have not consecrated themselves spiritually and concentrated themselves in the word of God.

God used new leaders, battle plans and strategies that gave the Israelites victory. Trusting God means

relying on God even if God requires you to do something in a new way. Sometimes we have to change. Sometimes we have to part with tradition in order to meet the requirements God places on us. The great protracted struggle is for the people of God to follow God completely. We have free will to obey or disobey God. Sometimes we stay too close to a particular tradition and it stifles growth, progress and development.

Where do the people of God go wrong? We don't trust God completely when God wants us to do new things and to employ new strategies. In our image-conscious society, we dare not appear too foolish or ridiculous for the things of God, lest we are ridiculed and rebuked by the larger society. But Joshua didn't care what others thought. He knew the LORD. He knew the LORD was able to deliver him in times of trouble. That's why the Israelites didn't mind singing hymns, playing trumpets and shouting in battle. The Israelites behaved contrary to the lyrics of My Way, "For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he is naught."⁵ The people of God placed their confidence in God, not themselves.

With the crossing of the Jordan, God employed a new leadership strategy by employing the clergy to lead the way forward. This was so that the people placed spiritual matters first and relied completely on God. The people of God had spiritually prepared themselves through consecration and concentration. God's Word, his promise, changed Joshua and the people. They consecrated themselves for the march forward. They concentrated on God's promises. Their mission was to take Jericho for God. Their mission was to establish themselves as a people in the promised land in order to move forward as a people of blessing to be a blessing to others.

Such is the case for us. We are to move into Wichita from our established base. From Wichita, we are to go into Sedgwick County, Kansas, the other forty-nine and to the ends of the earth. We, not simply our mission partners, are to take the good news of Jesus in word and deed to all within our spheres of influence. Eastminster is moving from an institutional understanding of the church to one that is missional. That is, we desire to be a congregation that lives a contagious Christian faith that meets real people in the midst of their real needs in order to provide real answers and real hope.

Being a missional congregation is summed up in our mission statement at Eastminster: "Being and Making Disciples." And we have five core commitments to assess how we are doing at fulfilling our mission statement: Know God, Grow in God, Connect in God, Serve God and Glorify God.

But, I notice five trends at Eastminster. First, we are not actively and consistently sharing our faith in Jesus

with those in our spheres of influence who may not know Jesus Christ. Second, a small percentage of our leadership, children, youth and adults participate in ongoing Christian education. Third, fellowship events draw minimal participation. Fourth, servanthood is decreasing. And fifth, worship attendance continues its historic weekly average, since 2001, of 1,100.

Am I being negative? Not at all. Eastminster is a healthy congregation, institutionally. However, God is calling us to be missional. God has called me, as your pastor, to lead. I am now engaging our elders in vision casting. We are mandated by God to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandments of loving God and loving neighbor. I will lead, but not as Frank Sinatra sang, “The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!”⁶ To the contrary, I desire to lead God’s way, as God’s Word teaches. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You.” Let us pray!

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⁵Paul Anka, *My Way*.

⁶bid.