

*February 5, 2012 Worship Service
First Presbyterian Church of Bentleyville, Pa.
Rev. Andrew Scott, Pastor
Joshua 5:13-6:7*

I have a little experiment to propose to you: the next time you're thinking about buying a new home, don't go to a realtor. Don't even go to the bank to find out how much you can afford to borrow. Instead, just find a house you'd like to own, march up to the front door, and tell the current residents that God promised this house to your great-great-great-great grandfather, and if they'd kindly move out by the end of the week and drop the keys in the mailbox, you'd be *very* appreciative.

Do that, and you'll understand the dilemma that the Israelites faced once they entered the promised land. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt, passed through the Red Sea, survived in the wilderness for forty years, and crossed the River Jordan in miraculous fashion, they still had one very big problem: the promised land was *occupied*. And the current residents weren't about to give it up easily.

Now, of course, God had warned them about this. The Canaanites, he said, had come under divine judgment because of their sins – in particular, idol worship, sexual immorality, and child sacrifice. The Lord promised that he would *drive* the Canaanites out before Israel. But when Joshua and his army arrived at the gates of Jericho, the Canaanites were most certainly still there.

Archaeology reveals that Jericho was a pretty well-fortified place throughout most of its history. It had high, stone and mud-brick walls with towers for archers. That might not sound too impressive, but remember that the Israelites were armed with nothing heavier than bows, swords and spears. Attack a brick building with a large stick and see for yourself how well it works.

There were, in the ancient world, a few established ways to take a walled city. The first, and the most common, was a siege. You surrounded the city, cutting off supplies and reinforcements, and essentially starving the locals out. But that often took years. The second method was to somehow tempt the defenders out into the open, and challenge them to battle. If you've ever read Homer, in particular, the Iliad, you know how risky that was. You might win. Or you might not. The third method was pure engineering. Either you built a machine to go over the enemy's walls, or you dug under, or some combination of the two.

Joshua was still pondering his strategy when, according to the end of chapter five here, he looked up to see an imposing figure standing in front of him, brandishing a sword.

"Are you for us," he asked, "Or for our adversaries?" A fair question, really. But not one to which he would get a straight answer.

"No," said the mystery man. "But I am the commander of the army of the Lord."

Now, I'm not sure Joshua knew who he was talking to when the conversation started. But clearly he asked the wrong question. Whether he knew it or not, Joshua was asking an archangel whether the Lord was on his side, or not. And the answer was that the Lord was on no one's side. The Lord was on the Lord's side. What was important was whose side *Joshua* was on.

Joshua, to his credit, responded the right way. He bowed down and asked, "What does the Lord say to his servant?"

The answer he received can only be described as... well, in all honesty, a little strange. Joshua was told first to take off his sandals, because the place where he stood was holy ground. Just like Moses had been. Not only had Joshua taken Moses' place as the leader of Israel, he had also taken Moses' place as the Lord's man, as his agent.

And then the plan was laid out: "See," said the Lord, "I have given Jericho into your hand." Now, to this point, Joshua has been talking to an angel of some sort. But suddenly, at the beginning of chapter six, the Lord himself is speaking. What's going on here?

There are two possibilities. The first is that angels, by their very nature, are perfect spokesmen. That means that what they say, God says, and what God says, they say. A man may speak to an angel as if he were speaking directly to the Almighty.

The second possibility is that the "Angel of the Lord" spoken of in the Old Testament is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ. Remember that John's Gospel says that he was there in the beginning, and that the book of Hebrews says that he is the perfect likeness of God. To speak to the Son *would* be to speak to the Lord, and the Son would be able to speak for the Father.

Either way, Joshua is given what can be described only as... well, as an *interesting* plan:

"You shall march around the city," Joshua was told, "all the men of war going around the city once. Thus you shall do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you shall 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..." (Joshua 6:3-5)

Keep in mind that Joshua and his officers had seen battles before. And in no case did victory follow from blowing trumpets and shouting. Any more than the traffic parts in front of you when you blow your horn. This seemed, at best... unlikely.

And yet, Joshua did it. Maybe because he didn't have a better idea. Maybe because he believed the Lord. Who knows? Either way, his army circled the city blowing horns once a day for seven days. And on the seventh day, the seventh time around the city, the walls fell. And so Joshua and his army took the mighty city of Jericho.

Humanly speaking, it shouldn't have happened. But that's the way God works. He's not bound by human expectations. Sometimes he simply flattens the walls in front of us.

If you remember last week, I told you to look here in these Old Testament stories for *patterns*, as much as for prophecies. And the battle of Jericho is a perfect example.

A lot of life is a struggle between our own plans and ideas and ambitions, and those of the Lord. Joshua knew how battles were usually fought in his day. We know how battles are usually fought in our own. They involve weapons, and strategy, and tactics. Only the Lord's tactics and strategies – not to mention his weapons – are often very, very different from our own.

We look at the world and see what you might call tactical problems. This person doesn't have enough to eat. That person is being abused. This other person is sitting around in despair. That person is drinking way too much.

We assume that tactical problems have tactical answers. Feed the hungry. Protect the abused. Encourage the despairing. Help the addicts. And those are all good things. But there's an underlying, strategic problem: people need Jesus. They need forgiveness. They need grace.

Jesus' own answers aren't exactly what you'd call commonsense. When someone strikes you on one cheek, he says, turn the other. When someone asks you to carry a burden for a mile, carry it for two. When someone hates you, love him back. When someone declares you to be his enemy, love him, and pray for him.

“If your enemy is hungry,” Jesus said, “feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals upon his head.” (Romans 12:20)

The people of God, according to the New Testament, are an odd bunch. At least as odd as the Israelites must have seemed to the Canaanites of Jericho. Their weapons – prayer and service and mercy and truth – are as foreign to our society as marching and shouting and horns were to Joshua's. And they seem just as unlikely to succeed.

But this is our command. To seek the kingdom of God according to his wisdom, not because it seems right to us, but simply because he's the Lord, and his ways are higher than our ways, his thoughts higher than ours.

The world says that there's no substitute for power, that politics is everything, that we have to win what's ours, or it'll be gone forever. The Lord says to love and serve the least of his people, and promises that the last will be first, and the first last. In all honesty, it's hard to believe that sometimes. But that's the Gospel. That's his way. Praise be to God. Amen.