

Frances Kitson
Summerland and Westbank United Churches
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Joshua 8

*Note: friends, I would call this sermon a failed experiment. Failure isn't bad, it's something from which we learn. Science knows this well!

I attempted in this sermon to explore ways of approaching violent and troubling texts in the Bible and dug really hard for good news by examining the historical context of the Book of Joshua. Even so, I don't think I found good news, and I don't think people were comforted or hopeful after hearing it! I thank those who shared their feedback, because it helped me grow and learn as a pastor.

I share this for what it's worth, with the caveat that I would do this differently next time.

The Lord said to Joshua, "Don't be afraid or terrified. Take the entire army with you. Start to go up to Ai. Look! I have given the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land into your power. Do to Ai and its king what you did to Jericho and its king. But you may take its booty and cattle as plunder. Set your ambush behind the city."

The ambush is a success, and the story continues:

Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city and that the smoke of the city was rising. So they turned and struck down the men of Ai. When other Israelites came out of the city to confront them, the men of Ai were caught in the middle. Some Israelites were on one side of them and some on the other. The Israelites struck them down until there was no one left to escape. But they seized the king of Ai and brought him to Joshua.

Israel finished killing the entire population of Ai that had chased them out into the open wasteland. All of them were finished off without mercy. Then all Israel went back to Ai and struck it down without mercy. Twelve thousand men and women died that day, all the people of Ai. Joshua didn't pull back the hand that was stretched out holding a dagger until he had wiped out the whole population of Ai as something reserved for God. However, Israel did take the cattle and other booty of that city as plunder for themselves, in agreement with the command that the Lord had given Joshua. Then Joshua burned Ai. He made it a permanently deserted mound. That is still the case today. He hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. At sundown, Joshua gave an order, and they took his body down from the tree. They threw it down at the opening of the city gate. Then they raised over it a great pile of stones that is still there today.

This violent story is not the first violent story in the Book of Joshua. Between last week's story, in which our doofus spies met Rahab, and this week's story, Joshua and the Israelites have

conquered the city of Jericho, slaughtered the inhabitants (except for Rahab and her family), and burned the city to the ground. Now they are repeating it here, with the city of Ai. Joshua and the Israelites will go on to do this again and again with various cities around the Promised Land.

This is troubling. And it should be. We're not going to sugarcoat it, but neither will we be afraid of it. We never find freedom by ignoring difficult things and pretending they aren't there. So let's wade into these troubled waters.

We're going to learn some history today to help us explore this text, and there are two terms I want you to bookmark in your brain: one, "the exile in Babylon"; two, "conquest narratives." Fyi, there is no test at the end.

So! First: exile in Babylon.

We don't know exactly when the Book of Joshua was written down, but like most books of the bible, it is probably a lot of stories from oral tradition, sewn up all together in one patchwork quilt of a book. But though we don't have an exact date, we're pretty sure that it wasn't finished until after the exile in Babylon. And this is really, really critical.

The land that we call Israel today, the land that is called Canaan in this story, was always playing a dangerous game of piggy-in-the-middle. The kingdom of Israel was never a major political player in the power games of its time. Egypt was on one side, and various empires of Mesopotamia were on the other: Assyria, Babylon, Persia. Israel was usually a tributary state to one of these empires and was required to send taxes and goods every year to a foreign empire. They were rarely fully free to run their own affairs; usually there was at least one foreign army on the move every year.

Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the big empire of the day was based out of the city of Babylon, which was 2700 km east of Jerusalem. In the year 597 BCE, Babylonian armies had come to the gate of Jerusalem but left the city intact. The Israelite people were required to pay a yearly tax – a mafia tax, really, in order to be left alone. But Babylon was having some political issues, and so the Israelite king tried to get away with not paying the tax, hoping the Babylonians wouldn't notice.

But they did.

Ten years later, in the year 586, the Babylonian army showed up again, and this time they meant business. Jerusalem was burned to the ground. The temple, the dwelling place of the Lord, was destroyed. The king was blinded, his sons executed, the population massacred – it is estimated that as much as 90% of the population was killed. Of the remaining 10%, the nobility, scribes, and any other useful people were carted off in chains to slavery in exile, never to see their homeland again. The poor and the peasants were left behind under Babylonian oversight to till the land.

It was the Holocaust of its day. It was devastating, it was beyond belief, it was traumatic. It was so traumatic that it remains a central event in Jewish memory and tradition to this day, 2500 years later.

Now, if the people who were taken into exile already had stories of Joshua, how might this event affect their telling and their remembering of Joshua? If a people who were displaced from their land, taken to a foreign country, and forced into slavery had ancient stories of a leader who came to the Promised Land under God's guidance, how might this event shape their telling of it?

Suffering in slavery, the Israelites would have been treated as nothing, as dirt, as expendable. Holding on to stories of Joshua and Moses and the Promised Land was an act of defiance, a way of saying: "We are not what the Babylonians say we are. We are who *God* says we are: God's people, to whom God has promised the land of Canaan." It would have been a way of holding on to identity, culture, and place. Traumatized by violence, it makes sense that violence would appear in their stories.

But there's another piece here. These stories of Joshua and the conquest were not made up out of thin air by the Israelites. They followed a format that already existed. They used a template with which they were very familiar. And that template was the *conquest narrative*.

The conquest narrative was basically post-conquest bragging. Israel had heard a lot of this from its neighbours. To explore this, we're going to compare verses from our reading today with a fragment of an Assyrian conquest account of the same period. The Assyrian empire was over by the time Babylon was on the scene, but it gives us the idea.

The Assyrian account, narrated by the king, goes like this:

I overwhelmed the lands Sarauš (and) Ammauš, which from ancient times had not known submission, (so that they looked) like ruin hills (created by) the Deluge.

I fought with their extensive army in Mt. Aruma, and I brought about their defeat.

The corpses of their men-at-arms I laid out on the mountain ledges like grain heaps.

I conquered their cities.

I carried away their gods.

I carried off their booty, possessions and property.

I burned, razed, and destroyed their cities.

I turned (them) into ruin hills and heaps.

I imposed on them the heavy yoke of my lordship.

I made them vassals of Aššur, my lord.

Let's read the Assyrian account: "I overwhelmed the lands Sarauš (and) Ammauš, which from ancient times had not known submission, (so that they looked) like ruin hills (created by) the Deluge." This is the ruler talking. Now compare that with Joshua, 8:1. "The Lord said to Joshua,

“Don’t be afraid or terrified. Take the entire army with you. Start to go up to Ai. Look! I have given the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land into your power.”

It’s not a carbon copy match, but we can see the themes of conquest and domination in both. But there’s a crucial difference: in the Assyrian text, it is the ruler who did all the conquering. In the Joshua text, it is *God* who gives the land and its people into the power of Joshua.

Then if we look at Joshua 8:24, we have description of slaughter. “Israel finished killing the entire population of Ai... All of them were finished off without mercy.” Compare that to “The corpses of their men-at-arms I laid out on the mountain ledges like grain heaps.” Again, not word-for-word, but a similar motif: wholesale slaughter. Devastation. Complete and total conquest.

Next let’s look at Joshua 8:27. Do you notice how God is mentioned in Joshua? Israel takes the cattle and other booty “in agreement with the command that the Lord had given Joshua.” Compare that with “*I carried away their gods. I carried off their booty, possessions and property.*” There’s no mention of an Assyrian god, he just carries off the possessions. For Israel, God sets rules for what is allowed.

Lastly, the aftermath. Verses 28 and 29: “Then Joshua burned Ai. He made it a permanently deserted mound... They raised over it a great pile of stones that is still there today.” And in the Assyrian one, “I burned, razed, and destroyed their cities. I turned (them) into ruin hills and heaps.” The similarity there is obvious.

So, to recap: we have a traumatized, exiled, enslaved people remaking their ancient stories about Joshua and the promised land – the land from which they have been removed and the land given to them by God. They are surrounded by powerful, violent empires who constantly use these conquest narratives.

So what do they do? They write their own conquest narrative. They take the story of their oppressors and remake it – with a crucial difference. In the story of Joshua, it is not Joshua who is king. It is *God*. It is God who is the victor, who is the king, who is the ruler. And what does God do, as a good king? God *gives* land. God gives the land to God’s people.

Yes, God takes it away from others in order to do so. Yes, others are killed. We are neither denying nor condoning that.

But if we seek the good news of this text; if we ask what God is saying to you and me today here and now, the good news is that God is trustworthy. The good news is that God will give what is necessary for life, for identity, for thriving, for security. Land was wealth, was sustenance, was nourishment, was identity for the Israelites. It wasn’t huge land, and most of them didn’t get wealthy, but it was a land of beauty and abundance, where milk and honey flowed.

God will give that which supports life. God will hear our cries and lead us to beauty and abundance. God cares for God's people. God will give us what we need to thrive.

This, I think, was what the exiled, enslaved Israelites were defiantly proclaiming. "*You* might plunder land for your own wealth and power," they are saying to the Babylonians, "but our *God* conquers land in order to make life possible."

How has God provided for us, friends? In all our dreams of wealth or ease or having whatever we don't have, where has God provided beauty and abundance that is just enough? How have we been nourished, sustained in our lives? We are conditioned to want more. But where is God calling us to see that all has been provided?

These are questions to sit with. Blessings on your musings, friends.