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August 2, 2020

Crossing Over

Exodus 3:7-8

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Deuteronomy 20:16-18

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your god has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

Joshua 1:1-7

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go."

Do not turn to the right or to the left, but go straight on. Easy to say, harder to do!

Here we are, friends, on the metaphorical doorstep of the Promised Land. The people of Israel have wandered in the wilderness for forty years, Moses has died, and it is time to enter the land. Hallelujah! The promises of God have been kept.

Except.

Except the land is already inhabited.

Oooh – this is sticky. How can an inhabited land be promised to someone else? How can *God* promise that land to someone else? And did we hear that middle passage correctly? Did God actually order the Israelites to *annihilate the Canaanites*? Did... did God sanction genocide?

exhale

This, dear friends, is why the Bible is not a simple how-to manual for life.

What we have here are two stories colliding: the Exodus narrative of liberation, in which God hears the cries of God's people enslaved in Egypt, sends Moses as a leader, performs mighty deeds that convince Pharaoh to let the people go, parts the Red Sea, and accompanies the Israelites in all their wandering. This is a story that has been and is a beacon of hope for oppressed people, proclaiming in no uncertain terms that God is a God of the persecuted and the poor.

But right alongside it, we also have a story of domination, of violence, and of conquest. This story has been invoked by Christian crusaders who slaughtered Muslim inhabitants of the Holy Land and it was used by some of the first European settlers in North America to justify the killing of Indigenous people and the occupation of their land.

In the coming weeks, we're going to explore how we might wrestle with the conquest of Canaan as depicted in the Book of Joshua. We'll ask what history can teach us, who might have written the Book of Joshua, and why, and when. We'll ask lots of important questions, because questions are a crucial part of a life of faith.

Through all of it, there is one particular question that we must always ask: what is the good news of this text? What is the good news God is offering us today through these texts?

We heard three different passages today, so let's start at the very beginning, because, according to *The Sound of Music*, that's a very good place to start.

Exodus. The two verses we heard from Exodus are full of good news! God hears the cry of God's people, knows their suffering, and will deliver them. God *listens*. God *responds*. Our God shows up for us when we are vulnerable and in pain. God is not selective in His love; we are not required to only present our best shiny selves to God. Moreover, God is involved in human life: She will come down to us and get Her hands dirty in the mud and manure and possibility of our lives. Our God is a hands-on God, real and present, closer than our own breath.

It also means that God gets political. God cares about those who have no power. When that's us, this is comforting news. When we feel small and helpless, this is very good news. And when we have power, we are called to share it. If people usually listen when we speak, then we learn to be quiet so that others may speak. We learn to use our voice in support of those who are not

listened to. We ask why we have power when others don't. We lose our fear of lessening our power.

Then we hear Deuteronomy: you shall annihilate the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. The people of Israel are called to slaughter the inhabitants of the Promised Land. How, exactly, is *this* good news?

We're going to hold that question, because I want to skip ahead to the Joshua passage we heard and explore that before tackling this hardest-of-all question.

Moses has died, having seen but not entered the Promised Land, and God addresses Joshua, the new leader. There is much good news in this passage. God has kept Her promise: God's people are about to enter the Promised Land. This land was promised generations and generations ago to Abraham, it was promised to Jacob and his descendants, and of course it was promised to the Israelites when God heard their cries in Egypt. God keeps His promises. God is faithful, steadfast, and stays with us through time. God can be relied upon. God tells Joshua that God will be with them; God will neither fail nor forsake them. This is good news.

But here's something interesting: God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous in entering the land, and to be very strong and courageous in following the law that was given to Moses. Do not turn to the right or to the left, says God.

Now. A very important translation note. The word that we usually translate as "law" is actually better translated as "teaching." This is important. One of the big mistakes that Christians make is to assume that God in the Old Testament is harsh, exacting, and unforgiving. We get the impression that God in the Old Testament is all about rules. And connected to this, we often believe that the Jewish faith, which also uses the Old Testament, is all about following the rules.

This is wrong, and I hammer this point every time I can. Christians have committed and still commit many sins against Jews, and we cannot afford ignorance of Jewish faith and Old Testament teachings. Jews do not keep torah – teaching – in order to earn God's love. Jews keep torah as a joyful and grateful response to God's faithfulness and promise. Some Jews have more strict and observable ways of keeping torah than others, but always, it is in response to God's love, not to earn it.

So when God tells Joshua that the people must follow the law, God is not talking about following the rules. God is talking about staying in relationship with God. God is talking about honouring God's values and following God's ways. Keep to the path. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left: keep moving towards God. Keep your eyes on God. It will be hard, which is why Joshua is told to be strong and very courageous: because keeping our eyes on God and keeping on the path of God can be hard. Why? Because there are so many siren calls that will call us off the path of God.

And this brings me back to the passage from Deuteronomy, in which the Israelites must kill everything that breathes.

There's a reason given as to why the Israelites must slaughter the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Did you catch it? It is this: "so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God."

The Canaanites are a danger because their presence and their practices will lure the Israelites away from the teaching of God, away from the path of God, away from relationship with God. Other gods will seem shinier and a safer bet. The presence of the Canaanites will cause the Israelites to veer sharply to the right and to the left.

What if we read this allegorically, as Christians and Jews have done for millennia? What if, instead of reading this as a real-life order to kill real-life people, we read this story as metaphor? As symbol?

God wants God's people in relationship with God. Are we, today, here in 21st century Canada, not called to worship other gods? We live in a world that calls us to worship money, shopping, sexiness, youth, whiteness, possessions, thinness, high grades, Instagram followers, and on and on and on. I constantly feel the temptation to hedge my bets with these things. So many shiny things are held out to us as promises: promises of belonging, of safety, of being wanted, being admired. How often do I measure my worth, my identity, my value by my grades, my clothes, my popularity?

This is what it means to worship other gods. But they are always, always false gods. Money is necessary for a baseline of health and security; clothes do help us feel confident and comfortable; high grades are gratifying when we have worked hard. But they are *never* the end all and be all, because those things will not hear our cries when we are small and scared and powerless. Those things will not get their hands dirty in the muck of our lives. Those things will not keep promises in our darkest times and stick with us when we are lost.

Slaughter that which will lure you to other gods. Slaughter that which will pull you away from our fierce and compassionate and faithful God. Show no mercy to your fears, your ego, your temptations.

It's an extreme image, but I wonder whether the good news here is that this is how badly God wants to be in relationship with us. This is how badly God wants to care for us. This is how badly God wants us to hear God's voice, to measure ourselves through God's eyes, to find life in God's teaching. God is yearning for us.

None of that softens the violence of the text. None of that changes the fact that this Biblical text contains language about killing people in the name of God. And that will always be dangerous. The only way to eliminate that danger is to remove the text altogether, and I'm going to talk in future sermons about why I think that's a bad idea.

It takes strength and courage to keep on the path with this Bible of ours, friends. It takes strength and courage to wrestle a blessing from the text. It takes strength and courage to follow the call of God through the Red Sea, into the wilderness, and on to the Promised Land. It takes strength and courage to keep coming back to God, to trust God, to put away our other gods.

But the promise of God, my friends, is that God will be with us. God will neither fail us nor forsake us. God will go before and behind us, leading us on. Thanks be to God.