

Joshua 24:1-18

In 1630 John Winthrop, shortly to become the first governor of the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, addressed his community on board ship, telling them that God had sent them out to establish a true Christian community, a city upon a hill, upon which the eyes of all people would look. They would serve as a witness to the God who had led them there, and the responsibility was grave: "If we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world; we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake: we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going."ⁱ He closed by quoting Joshua: "Therefore, let us choose life, that we, and our seed, may live; by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity."

One may look back on the nearly 400 years since John Winthrop and acknowledge the truth of what he said: the establishment of Euro-American Christians upon the North American continent has significantly been a story of dealing falsely with God, thus shaming the faces of many of God's worthy servants, though not in the way that Winthrop envisioned. By seeing themselves as recipients of a manifest destiny to colonize and dominate the land, white Americans before us did untold damage to the native people and to the Africans they enslaved and brought here to work. They used extractive technologies to enrich themselves while exhausting the land and decimating the creatures of God that had depended on the land. And they used the myth of the city on a hill to justify adventures abroad, toppling legitimately

elected heads of state in Iran and Chile and elsewhere, sowing the seeds for the refugee crises now embroiling Europe and the United States.

Nor were our American forebears alone in scandalizing the name of Christ for the purposes of domination. The Orthodox Christian Studies Center recently published an article about the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, noting that

It has forsaken the elegant curves of a traditional Russian dome to deliberately resemble nuclear missiles (which Russian priests have [cheerily blessed](#)). The classic two-dimensional apse mosaic of Christ has been swapped out for a [tacky sculpture](#), defying centuries of Orthodox wisdom which traditionally eschewed three-dimensional representation. Defending the [six billion ruble \(US million\) expenditure](#), one Orthodox priest said that “metal, wood, glass and talent were offered practically free, for a few kopecks. People worked, worked hard for the glory of God.”ⁱⁱ

It is just the teeniest bit awkward, therefore, to read the words of Joshua today, rehearsing the story of genocide as the Israelites invaded Canaan and decimated the locals, to live in towns they had not built and eat the fruit of vineyards and olive trees that they had not planted. One feels ambivalent. Or confused.

But wait! There are clues to redemption in the text itself.

This re-telling of the story of God’s covenant with Israel, like every re-telling, is an assertion of identity and an invitation to renew or not renew the commitment that their ancestors had made. Remembering together cements a shared history, putting into context the squabbles of the current day. That can then provide a vision of a faithful future. Even within Joshua’s triumphal point of view, he can remind the people that their past is not completely stellar. Father Abraham, that exemplar of faith, once worshiped other gods. It is brave to remember that and admit it, and it is just the first of a series of examples of ways in which Israel never earned or deserved good fortune, but received it only because God gave it. If father

Abraham was not immune to the worshiping of false/other gods, then who are you to think that you are.

Perhaps more to the point, when we read this story through the lens of an imperial conqueror, which is certainly our historical experience, we may be using the wrong lens. This is not our story, though our forebears appropriated it and used it to justify their exploitations.

This is the story of a scrappy little outsider tribe surviving and claiming that they were thriving.

Recall the cultural conditions of this story's first narrators:

In the ancient world battles were seen as the physical manifestation of a contest between the gods. When one army had a victory over another, it was seen not as a result of their military might or strategy, but ultimately their god's victory over the other army's god. This is why there are accounts of an entire battle being decided by a contest between two warriors (like in the battle between David and Goliath). This is also a major understanding of the events of the Deuteronomic histories. Throughout, you see military victories being attributed to the might of the LORD, and the righteousness of the Israelite armies, and defeat as a sign that there is 'sin in the camp'. So [suggesting] that God orders the destruction of a certain city may be very much the theological interpretation of events after the fact, rather than a literal divine order. This is absolutely Joshua's purpose for this retelling, God was on their side, and as proof he submits their victory. (*Aaron Ochart*)

We need to be honest about the relative power of the tribes of Israel and the other tribes. This was not a colonizing force, this was not like the British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese kingdoms using the Doctrine of Discovery to take land and lives from indigenous first nations on Turtle Island (North America) and other places. . . . Despite the way that they sometimes represent themselves, all evidence suggests that this was a small nomadic tribe coming up against at least equal if not superior local tribes. That would make these skirmishes more like border disputes than imperial expansion. We are so used to being on the side which misuses and abuses superior strength, [that] thinking outside of that assumption is difficult for us. (*Ochart*)

This speech attributed to Joshua, and probably written after a lot more history had happened, is a recitation of the history of a small, unimpressive group of people who were consistently protected and given a future by the grace of God. It is a reminder that *everybody* serves some master, and an invitation to commit to serving this God, to staying inside the story of the unimpressive people loved by God. So when we read it, we need not to read it as our

forebears did, as giving us license to dominate and destroy. We need to figure out where in our own time and place we are small and unimpressive, and how we have the option to recommit to the God who provides us a future.

So let me offer some examples.

Marsha P. Johnson was a transwoman who lived in Greenwich Village from 1966 till her death in 1992 and took leadership in the Stonewall Riots. She co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). The Revolutionaries were able to organize with homeless and or runaway transgender individuals to build a community and live together. The responsibilities of the “children” or “youth” of the house were to find food for the house, a relatively safe responsibility compared to prostitution that Marsha had experienced in her youth to pay rent. Marsha was referred to as the Queen Mother. The Queen aspect came from her love of dressing in drag and performing at drag balls. The Mother aspect came from the matriarchal structure of the STAR house as a way to not live under patriarchal structure where the man is the head of the household. Is Marsha P. Johnson a household word? Are there universities named for her? No and no. Did God open a way for her and her “children”? Yes.

Or, in Simran Jeet Singh’s book *The Light We Give*, which we’re reading in Sunday School, he tells the story of his elementary school trip to a skating rink. He and his brothers were denied entrance, even though their mother pleaded with the skating rink guy. He saw his mother crying, and found out what had happened, and he began to cry too. But his mother stopped him and said, “Wait, you don’t know why I’m crying.” And she told him that when the other parents had found out that the rink wouldn’t admit the brown boys with turbans, they had all decided that they didn’t want their children skating there, and they were all leaving.

Singh says, “That’s 40 people giving off light, and one with darkness. That’s not a bad ratio.”

This is the kind of action we find ourselves called to take, sometimes without warning, sometimes relatively small, but important—as part of our commitment to the God who has brought us this far.

Joshua’s speech to the people is not an exhortation to go out and decimate all others, despite its appropriation by those who intended to do exactly that. It’s a reminder that they had no reason to expect another day to dawn, given their own resources, and that God had brought them through time and again to one new day after another. Do we serve the God who has liberated and continues liberating? Or do we serve the gods that seem implacably dominant, or that offer rewards that benefit only ourselves and not the rest of God’s children? Joshua’s story is our story too, however obscure and uncinematic we may feel ourselves to be. We are all called to make a difference.

Lord who will provide. You have given us abundantly more than we could ask or imagine. You have given us all that we have. You call us to trust that you will continue to provide for our daily needs, rather than the gods from the past and the gods around us today. Help us to have faith that you can supply our needs, according to your riches and glory. Amen.

ⁱ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”

ⁱⁱ https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/25/woman-of-peace-temple-of-war/?_hsmi=229242333&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-QfQGZpyiu-OaqSFb4D_rmetdyb9gk9usoufDTDybgBT-gMp8Lu8W_3mv3NK0cjvfaDJQjpth5xduPL6RT7ZAIEugaA