

6.23.24

Who is On the Lord's Side

Joshua 5:13-15

Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

It isn't easy to follow a larger than life, longtime leader like Moses who led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and so much more, but someone had to do it, and that overwhelming responsibility was given to a man named Joshua. The Book of Joshua presents the story of Israel under Joshua's leadership as they seek to create a society in which people lived out God's commandments which were given for their wellbeing which included justice for all including the poorest orphan, widow, and stranger. God had been leading the people for 40 years through the wilderness after their deliverance from enslavement in Egypt. In today's scripture, the Israelites have crossed the Jordan River outside the city of Jericho which was an urban settlement about four miles west of the river. Jericho had a spring-fed oasis and had dominated the lower Jordan plain for 6,000 years or more. It was an ancient city. Joshua and the Israelites are coming to conquer the people there and to establish their own nation. That sets the scene for Joshua 5:13-15 (NRSV).

Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. **Joshua went to him** and said to him, "*Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?*" He replied, "**Neither**; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And **Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped**, and he said to him, "*What do you command your servant, my lord?*" The commander of the army of the LORD said to Joshua, "*Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.*" And **Joshua did so**.

This is a rather obscure story and I'm guessing most of us aren't familiar with it and have never heard a sermon on it. I was drawn to it during my reading a while ago, and I was struck by several things that I want to share. Whenever you read the Bible, there are several questions to ask of any verse or passage and one of those questions is, **is there a virtue or behavior to be imitated or followed?** In other words, is there something someone is doing that I should be doing that will make me a better disciple and a better person? In these three verses, I see **three things in Joshua and one overall thought** that I want to remember and seek to practice in my own life, and

maybe they will give you something to think about and consider too. **The three things we learn about Joshua in this story that are worth practicing are his Courage, his Reverence, and his Obedience.**

Let's start with **Joshua's Courage**. Courage is a virtue that's praised, admired, and honored in every culture in the world. Physical courage, moral courage, emotional and relational courage; courage in all its forms is admirable and beneficial. Courage is a virtue we all should seek to cultivate and practice. By this point in his life, Joshua has proven himself to be a man of physical courage. A quick recap of Joshua's life and career; he first appears in Exodus 17:8–13, where Moses appoints him to lead the battle against Amalek, which he does successfully. As one of the twelve spies sent to reconnoiter the land of Canaan, he agrees with Caleb; Joshua and Caleb constitute the minority who recommend confidence in God and a direct assault (Numbers 14:6–10). Ten other leaders say it can't be done. For this God exempts Joshua and Caleb from the condemnation of that generation to death in the wilderness for their lack of faith. God then tells Moses to lay his hands on Joshua and designate him a leader like Moses, who will be obeyed fully by the people (Numbers 27:18–23; Deuteronomy 34:9).

I know it's not easy to imagine yourself living several thousand years ago in the middle east but try to put yourself where Joshua is at this moment. You're getting ready to attack a city. it appears Joshua is doing a little reconnaissance near Jericho when, *"he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand."* If you were a stranger in a strange land and you suddenly looked up and saw a man with a drawn sword standing before you, what would your first response be? You might say the prudent thing would be to run away. You might stop immediately and try to assess if you thought you could defeat that person in single combat. You might back up enough to give yourself room to run away if communication was unsuccessful. Joshua does none of these things. Rather than running away, retreating to a safer distance, or even standing still, **Joshua went to him. That took courage. It takes courage to take the initiative in any situation**, whether that's initiating a conversation or a friendship, to ask someone out on a date, to try out for a team, a musical group, or a play, to try something new, it takes courage to take the initiative as Joshua does.

In our lives, one of the ways we can cultivate courage is when we face an unexpected or expected challenge, is not to run from it, not to seek to avoid it, but to face it head on, like Joshua. If you're in a situation where courage is required, lean into it, embrace it, **let your faith be stronger than your fear**, and close the distance between whatever is causing your fear or anxiety so you can address it and deal with it.

Another thing I find admirable about Joshua's courage is that he not only has the physical courage to approach a man with a drawn sword in his hand who appears ready to fight, it's what Joshua does next, **he asks him a question**. How often in situations of stress or conflict do we make assumptions about other people and what they're thinking or what their motivation is, and how often are we mistaken? How often do we make declarative statements about people that aren't helpful and may be wrong, "*You always, you never, you're such a...*" Joshua asks a question seeking to gain accurate information, he asks a question so he knows what he's dealing with, he doesn't assume that this man with the sword is an enemy or friend, but he wants to know, so he asks, **"Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?"** I admire Joshua's courage – he sees a man with a drawn sword in front of him, **and he didn't run away, he took the initiative, went to him and asked him a question.**

The man replied, "**Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.**" And **Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped.**

The second thing I admire about Joshua is his Reverence. He places himself face down on the ground in a position of complete vulnerability. If this were an enemy, Joshua could easily have been killed. Before I talk about Joshua's reverence, however, I need to dwell on the answer he's given which contains **the overall thought to remember** in this brief exchange. That thought is: **God doesn't come to take sides. God comes to take over!** This story in Joshua is one of the most insightful examples in the Bible of why **none of us should dare presume or take for granted that God is on our side. There's a need for all of us to be free from the Sin of Presumption.**

Joshua asked, "Whose side are you on; ours or theirs?" The divine response is "**Neither.**" How could God not be on Joshua's and Israel's side? They're Abraham's children. God delivered them from Egypt through signs and wonders. They were led by

God through the wilderness. God divided the Red Sea and the Jordan River for them to cross. Yet we hear God reminding them and us **that we should never presume God is automatically on anybody's side**. The angel came to tell Joshua what to do to take Jericho, but helping Joshua was not about God taking a side in human governments. Basically, the commander of the army of the Lord said: *"Don't think I'm here because I'm on your side. I'm here because God is calling you to do His work. And in this case, in this instance, this is His work. But it's not about 'sides.'"* No, it isn't. It's dangerous when we make assumptions about what side God is on, or when we live and act as if we know we're on God's side and other people are not. God's work on this planet, God's redemptive plan, God's movement throughout all of history is to call human beings into relationship – ultimately through Jesus Christ... that is God's side.

Joshua's response to both **the identity and message** of the one standing before him is **he fell on his face to the earth and worshiped**. This humble posture, his **reverent worship**, is something we can emulate. Joshua embodies both courage and humility. He doesn't think too highly of himself and rightly and appropriately is reverent and worshipful. While most of us likely haven't had an encounter like Joshua does, especially with the commander of the army of the Lord, Joshua's response causes us to ask ourselves, do I believe God is still living and active? Do I believe God's Spirit is still working in the world? Am I open to God showing up at unexpected times and places? Am I inviting the Lord to speak to me and am I open to listening and responding? When was the last time, like Joshua, that you truly humbled yourself before God?

I admire Joshua's **courage**, his **humble reverence**, and third I admire his **Obedience**. Joshua asks, *"What do you command your servant, my lord?"* Joshua defines himself as a servant of the Lord. I wonder how many of us define ourselves that way. Most people don't aspire to grow up to be a servant. Many people think they'll find happiness if they're famous, rich, or powerful. Yet many famous, rich, and powerful people are profoundly unhappy and unhealthy and so are their families. Not as many people when asked would say, "I want to be a servant," Yet being a servant of the Lord is the path to contentment, peace, and joy.

As a lifelong Boston sports fan, I was thrilled the Boston Celtics won the NBA title this week after being the best team in the league all season. I was even happier to see stories in the media about the faith of players like Jrue Holiday and Head Coach Joe Mazzulla who are committed Christians and regularly express praise and gratitude to God. Celtics star Jayson Tatum thanked God on Monday night after his team claimed the NBA championship — but perhaps not for the reason you might think. He didn't say God took sides in the NBA Finals. Tatum was careful to say that his gratitude to God didn't stem from winning. Instead, it stemmed from how God had helped him throughout the season. *"First of all, God is the greatest,"* Tatum said, ***"Not because we won, but to put me in position to maximize my God-given ability to surround me with these guys, my family — this is an incredible feeling."*** That's good theology. Jaylen Brown, who was named the Finals MVP, said during the trophy presentation that his *"faith in the most high"* **enabled him to let go of anxiety and doubt** this season and take his game to a new level. Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla was wearing a shirt after the game that said, ***"But first... Let me thank God."*** Seeing ourselves as servants of the Lord, seeking to maximize our ability, to do our best with what God's given us, and to live gratefully and obediently to whatever God asks us to do is a good path to follow.

Joshua is told, *"Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy."* And **Joshua did so**. The first task he's given isn't huge, it's not difficult, it's something he's done thousands of times, *"remove your sandals."* Often living obediently as God's servant involves doing things that are simple and basic. Joshua didn't know that he'd have a divine encounter that day. He didn't know the place where he was standing was holy. We need to remember this because it tells us that anywhere we are, at any time, any encounter with another person may turn into a holy encounter, it could be we're in a holy place that we didn't expect or anticipate.

Seeking to live obediently on God's side and not our side requires learning and growth from all of us, even someone like Joshua. Years before today's scripture, in **Exodus 33:11** Joshua appears as a young man serving as Moses' assistant in the tent of meeting. He urges Moses to restrict spirit-inspired behavior by other people in the camp, but he's overruled by Moses. **Numbers 11:28–29** says, And Joshua son of

Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, *“My lord Moses, stop them!”* But Moses said to him, *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”* Which is a foreshadowing of what happened on the Day of Pentecost.

In the Gospels, we see the disciples of Jesus making the same mistake as young Joshua. The saying of Jesus I shared last week from Matthew’s Gospel about welcoming children and not being a stumbling block is found in Mark’s Gospel sandwiched around a brief exchange between the disciple John and Jesus. In **Mark 9:38-41**, John said to him, *“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons **in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.**”* But Jesus said, *“**Do not stop him**; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. **Whoever is not against us is for us.** For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”*

The disciples wanted to stop the unknown exorcist because he wasn’t known to them, they don’t think he’s on their side, but Jesus tells them not to discourage people who do good work for the kingdom in his name. Those who rely on Jesus are for him and people who perform miracles in Jesus’ name recognize his authority, and their miracles support Christ and his teachings.

The disciples needed to learn the lessons of Joshua, to be **courageous, reverent, and obedient**, and it was a process for them as it is for all of us. In any situation, seek to discern humbly what the Lord’s side is, what the Lord is doing, and then join in that work – it will usually be in line with what Jesus taught – love, forgive, be kind, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick, in prison, or lonely, build community, be a peacemaker, and an advocate for truth and justice, share joys and sorrows, help those having the hardest time. Live out your faith.

Whatever you’re going through, whatever challenge you’re facing, you’ll face it **better with courage, reverence, and obedience as a servant of Christ.**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How do you think Joshua felt about following Moses as the leader of the Israelites and seeking to guide a large group of migrants into the land of Canaan? How do you think the Canaanites felt?
2. What do you learn about Joshua's courage in Joshua 5:13? Think of a challenge you're facing; how can you walk forward with courage to face it rather than running away in fear?
3. Read Joshua 5:14, what do we discover about presuming that God is on our side?
4. What do we learn from how Joshua responded to the commander of the army of the Lord? What did Joshua do? What did he say?
5. What does Joshua 5:13-15 and other passages in the Bible (such as Deuteronomy 10, Acts 10, and Romans 2) teach us about God and favoritism or partiality?
6. How can we seek to be on the Lord's side, rather than trying to convince ourselves that God is on our side? What does God's side stand for and look like (consider the life of Jesus, Colossians 3, and James 2, for example)?