

The Great Eight Core Stories of the Bible – Core Story #4 – the Promised Land: Location, Location, Location...

Ladner United Church – Sunday

March 7th, 2010

JIM SHORT
0900 and 1100hrs...



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Our lessons are selections from the Hebrew Scriptures, the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. These passages concern the fourth of the great eight core stories of the Bible, the Promised Land.

For forty years, the people of Israel under the leadership first of Moses and then Joshua wandered in the desert. The number "40" is a symbolic number in scripture designating a cycle of time or completion. In this case, it means a generation. With the exception of two people, Joshua and Caleb, no one including Moses who actually left Egypt entered the Promised Land. Moses makes a formal speech and dies seeing the Promised Land from a distance, but not entering it. (Pause)

Reading selected verses from Deuteronomy: **(pause)**

This entire commandment...you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. ²Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna... in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. * ⁴The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years... ⁶Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. ⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

¹⁹If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them; I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God." **(Pause)**

Hear these further words of introduction. It is Joshua who assumes Moses' mantle of leadership of the tribes and leads the people into the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River. The land of promise though was not empty and was inhabited by a diverse people in small city states who were not aware that the land was promised to Israel. The result was an eruption of conflict and war.

Though the Bible narrates a military conquest, scholars debate various options. Was it a gradual and peaceful settlement through assimilation or more of an indigenous uprising of peasants against a wealthy landed class that was augmented by immigrating tribes from the desert?

Whatever took place, it began at Jericho, a small fortified town of about 2000 people located in an area of fertile soil, abundant water resources and easy access to trade routes.

Whatever else is said, the text do raise profound and disturbing questions about God, violence and the role of states and religion. (Pause)

Reading Selected Verses from Joshua 6 **(pause)**

Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites... ²The LORD said to Joshua, 'See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. ³You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, ⁴with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵When they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you 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, and all the people shall charge straight ahead.' ⁶So Joshua son of Nun summoned the priests and said to them, 'Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and have seven priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark of the LORD.' ⁷To the people he said, 'Go forward and march around the city; have the armed men pass on before the ark of the LORD.' ...Each day they marched around the city once and then returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

¹⁵ On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. ¹⁶And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, 'Shout! For the LORD has given you the city. ¹⁷The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers we sent. ²⁰So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it.

Hear these further words of introduction. When the land has taken over by the people of Israel, the covenant is renewed and the people of Israel are reminded to remember who got them to this land, to not forget that and to engage in another covenantal act. (Pause)

Reading from Joshua 24, the covenant is renewed between God and the people of Israel: **(pause)**

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem...and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; ⁴and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots... ³I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

14 'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will

serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

16 Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.'

22 Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.' 23 He said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.' 24 The people said to Joshua, 'The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.'

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+++++"Gracious and loving God, may the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips if they be your words be worthy and acceptable unto you and may your people hear your word either through me or despite me. Amen. +++++"

One of the things I am experiencing as I both preach through these eight course stories of the Bible and we work through them in the study...is

How much I (and we) like answers, clarity, something neat and packaged that we can open, appreciate, understand and not have any conflict or difficulty with...we want our faith and the journey of faith to be easy and clear

One way to say that is we want only the Promised Land and to by pass slavery and the wilderness...

The challenge is – that faith is not always so....

We live in the time of twitter – you get only 140 characters to say it and the sound byte generation – two minutes and 30 seconds is our attention span...

As much as in these stories and in this study there have been times of inspiration and comfort and times of "ah ha" – there have been times of tough slugging and hard work...

Some of you have shared with me that these stories are challenging ones to understand and remember and that it has felt like walking upstream against the current with big rubber boots on...

We are on a quest to authentically hear the God breathed (inspired) wisdom of the Bible and have it speak to us through God's Spirit in the time and life we live...

and we want to do more than "cherry picking" or "high grading"(those are garage sale words – its getting close to that time of year – it means getting into the garage sale first and getting on the best stuff) particular things to make our points, answer our questions or defend our positions...

We don't want to do this: to illustrate this let's use this method of "cherry picking" on the issue of slavery...

Is slavery right or wrong? Well if you start thumbing...through the Bible looking for an answer – you will find many stories about slavery that treat having slaves as if slavery is quite normal – even to finding Paul in the NT Book of Philemon suggesting that a runaway slave should be returned to its master...

And then – you will find other passages where slavery is refuted – so Paul for example talking about how in the new creation of Christ – all persons are free and equal...

Well...a hundred years plus back – a Christian Nation to the South of us fought a civil war – with some people believing in the right to have slaves and others believing it was not right – and as late as the 1960's and into today – the issues and manifestations of slavery are still hotly contested...

Cherry picking the bible does not give us the answers we need to live a faithful life...

Rather we've been this about the bible...

There is a profound and important truth in the bible beyond a literal meaning that we both want and need to hear...

And for the Spirit to speak through the bible...

We must both understand and free it from its historical and cultural context...

Understand it as a human record of people working out and understanding their relationship to God...

As well as seeing its themes and core stories and teachings in the light of our experience of Jesus Christ being a fulfillment of God's promise...

and accepting that "revelation" – God's speaking to us did not end with the canonization of the bible (in its present form of 66 books) but continues to do as we in the church community engage scripture using reason, tradition, experience all breathed upon by God's spirit in a kind of unending conversation...

This honest engagement, this wrestling with the biblical texts brings about a deep blessing...though not always an easy one...and allows the bible to be more than some kind of Jesus hot water bottle...

If my explanation is not helping – let's use the words of two scholars on the bible - first

Marcus Borg...an American theologian...in his book

(The Heart of Christianity...p 45ff)...This is what he says about the bible:

"The Bible is the product of two historical communities, Ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. The Bible is the response of these two ancient communities to God. It contains their stories about God's involvement in their lives, their laws and ethical teachings, their prayers and praises, their wisdom about how to live and their hopes and dreams. It is not God's witness to God (not a divine product) but their witness to God. It is related to their time and place. The emphasis is not on words

inspired by God, but on people moved by their experience of the Spirit, namely, these ancient communities and the individuals who wrote for them."The bible is:

Our foundation document – the foundation upon which Christianity is built

Our identity document – its stories and visions are to shape our sense of who and what we are and of what our life with God is about

Our wisdom tradition in that it answers tow most central questions – what is real and how shall we live?

To be a Christian means to be in a primary continuing conversation with the bible as foundational for our identity and vision.

And

N.T. Wright (An English Anglican Bishop) in his book – "Simply Christian" – p 182-184

"The bible isn't there simply to be an accurate reference point for people who want to look things up and be sure they've got them right. It is there to equip God's people to carry forward his purposes of new covenant and new creation. It is there to enable people to work for justice, to sustain their spirituality as they do so, to create and enhance relationships at every level, and to produce that new creation which will have about it something of the beauty of God. The bible isn't like an accurate description of how a car is made. It's more like the mechanic who helps you fix it, the garage attendant who refuels it, and the guide who tells you how to get where you're going. And where you're going is to make God's new creation happen in this world not simply to find your own way unscathed through this old creation...The Bible is here to enable God's people to be equipped to do God's work and in God's world, not to give them an excuse to sit back smugly, knowing they possess all of God's truth."

So far...we've looked at three cores stores encompassing the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures...I can't really sum things up for those of you who may have missed a sermon or two – but you can read them on the church website or pick one up from the table or the office...

But let me see if I can give you the twitter version (twitter is a social networking site like Face book in which people send brief messages or "twitters" about what they are doing and thinking – you can send them to certain people who choose to follow you and vice versa..."

To send a message to someone else on twitter – you can have only 140 characters including spaces...

This is my twitter version of the last 4 weeks sermons:

Every relationship from creation @ us particular treasures begins with God/ dumb things done like not keeping rules doesn't cancel God's love

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The Promised Land...

It takes Moses and the people 40 years (40 in biblical terms is a code number – it means a long long time – at least a generation) to get there – in fact Moses dies before he enters the land though he sees it from afar...

Joshua his successor and Caleb are the last living survivors of the Egyptian slavery – every one else was born in the desert...

This 40 years was no weekend camping trip after having visited Mountain Equipment Co-op for all the expensive stuff to make you look Gucci and keep you warm and safe...

imagine – one day in South Delta – everyone who lives here is told they have two days to pack everything up – you can take only what you can carry or move – and you have to be gone to start moving East and you don't know where the journey will end or when...

Can you imagine that...that's the 40 years...?

The time in the wilderness is both a time of blessing for Israel and a curse...

The wilderness is a place where God shapes the covenant people – God's particular treasure – teaches them and forms them...to be God's people who are to be ultimately – this is an important word to remember – a blessing...

The promise made to Abraham – a blessing to all the nations of the world...

Generally two things happen:

When Israel "complains and murmurs" about things they really need. i.e. like water and bread...

Moses intercedes for the people

God hears

And God provides...

But when Israel "complains and murmurs" about things they want

God hears and gets angry

Moses intercedes for the people

And God forgives them...you can see what is emerging is that Moses is a kind of Christ figure – a person who Jesus is both modelled after and compared to favourably...

Eventually they come to the "Promised Land" – and here we have to acknowledge...that the surprise that Joshua had was that they got there and there were other people living there and those other people didn't know the land was promised to someone else...

(It is worth noting that scholars still debate whether the entry into the Promised Land was a military conquest, a slave uprising against cruel masters or just a gradual assimilation through intermarriage)

that the question of the Promised Land – has been a huge determining issue in the history of the last three centuries and still is the central hot spot where the relationship of the world's three great monolithic faiths – Christianity, Judaism and Islam is still being fought over and worked out...

And the Promised Land texts – with the very visceral current of violence and warfare that run through the Hebrew Scriptures are troubling...

No way to get around that – they are – texts of terror – texts of war and we struggle with we are to hear in this and do with it...

The world is still in a kind of wilderness about war and its place and role in our society...

It's a contemporary question – is it God's will to use violence to achieve God's goals...it's the debate about holy war, just war...

Sometimes is clear – most of the WW2 generation accepted that the only way to stop Hitler (Pharaoh) was to respond to violence with violence...

that is not as clear to everyone in places like Afghanistan...and dealing with our neighbours in the so called age of terror...and it is okay for us to struggle with the role of violence in these texts and ask whether they are God given – if we do not struggle and

have a discomfort with war even when we feel we have to use state sanctioned violence...then we run the risk of making war and all its horrors normative....

Note the Battle of Jericho – despite singing that great old song...

In truth...

It's not much of a military battle...in fact it is more like an act of worship...

Joshua and the Priests blow the horns of worship

The people shout

The Priests march the Ark of the Covenant (the box holding the stones the Ten Commandments are written on) around the city 7 times

And on the 7th day the walls come tumbling down

Everything in the city is killed and burnt – as a kind of sacrifice to God – an acknowledgement that God owns it all

Except for some things taken from the city for the temple...

So it's not really Joshua's victory, it's not the victory of the army or the people – they don't get to keep the spoils...

Again the emphasis is upon what God has done...what God is achieving...what God is doing...

So it's not about Holy War, Crusades or Jihad...

There is a kind of spiritual geography emerging here...to help us understand life...

In life there is: Egypt – slavery, imprisonment, evil, addiction

There is the wilderness – a place at times we find it helpful to be in – at times a place we are thrust into it and we do not want to be there

And there is the Promised Land – a place, a home – everyone needs to have a home...

Whether you're homeless on the street in one of Canada's cities...

Whether you are literally or metaphorically an "orphan" – you have no family...

Walk through the door of a church – unless you find a home or place in the community – just sitting on the pew won't do much

Your spirit/heart/inner being has to find a home – a relationship

Or you are an Arab refugee living in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip or a Jewish person being persecuted in a land that is not your home...

Everyone needs a place...because it is in a place – a promised land...that we find relationship and love...

Sometimes place is land

Sometimes it is a home

Sometimes it is a spirit

Sometimes it is a relationship

Always it is something of permanence and security that radiates God's covenantal love...

...and we live don't we always "East of Eden" never quite feeling that we've come home in all of our longings and perhaps the totality of the "Promised Land" will always be not fulfilled until we arrive in the land beyond this life...fully at home with God...

Christians would come and we are moving to that time again in the church year to understand that all the hopes of a "promised land" are in our faith practice found in and through the gift of Jesus and the community that was birthed from his resurrection...

This core story ends with Joshua summoning all of the people of Israel

To gather and to again re-affirm their choice about who and what they will

Serve...

the danger identified with the text is that once into this great land flowing with milk and honey and all that good stuff and after they got comfortable would they begin to forget who brought them to this land and whose gift it was

And they would begin to say – we did it all on our own, this was our doing, it was our efforts that brought us here...

As for me and my house we will serve (same word as worship) YHWH our God...

To worship

To give our very best, our very self to something...

To serve God and not to serve other idols that promise life or even to serve simply ourselves...

Thought

To remember in the hundreds of acts of our daily and weekly livings what we heard of last week and what Jewish people call the Shema

To love the lord your God with all your heart and your entire mind and all your strength and to love your neighbours as your self...

To remember who and what we serve...

We're in the afterglow of the Olympic Games now...

it was great...the events, the venues, the athletes, the memories, the red mittens, to not get some kind of joy and excitement about that you'd have to be some kind of grinch or scrooge...no matter what level you participated in it....

And I had a lot of respect both for those who organized and those who protested (the non violent part)

Because I think the protesters – many who came from the Christian community

Were remembering something about whom and what we serve...

There is a dark side to the Games...beyond homelessness and the expenditure of so much government money spend on pleasure...

And it has something to do with slavery – the great influx of sex trade workers

Their Campaign was called "Buying Sex is not a sport"

There is a great influx of sex trade workers before every Olympic Games or major world sporting event like the World Cup.

90% of those trafficked are women and girls and across the world the number of people trafficked across Trans – national borders numbers into the millions.

Human trafficking is described: "Mandate Feb 2010)

...recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring, or receiving people through the threat and use of force or other forms of coercion so that a person has control over another person for the purpose of exploitation."

That's a religious issue, a spiritual issue

At the heart of human trafficking is the love of things and using people...as it is a core value at the heart of our society...

The one God YHWH...designed a world and called us into a covenant of using things and loving people...that we might be blessings to each other and all live in a promised land...

The reality of human slavery and trafficking in our world is Egypt....Choose you this day whom it is that you will serve....