

Joshua 6:1-5
Title
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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When the kids and I moved into our house last summer one of, let's say the less wonderful aspects we inherited was a hedgerow in the backyard that was overgrown 2 years ago, and now is out of control. So for the last few weeks as I'm doing my Saturday yard work I have walked back and forth, back and forth—silently. Though I have to admit I have mumbled a few words under my breath as I was doing so. Pacing, plotting, praying that one of these days I would wake up and it would just be gone. I even tried yelling at it a few weeks ago, it's still there. In short, the 100 feet or so of brush that ought to be cleared might as well be 100 miles—it just feels impossible.

Do you have an obstacle you face that feels impossibly daunting like that? This morning we're once again returning to the banks of the Jordan River, only this time we're clear on the other side. We're all but in the Promised Land with the Israelites, I mean we can see it on the horizon. But between it and us is a fortress of a city, Jericho, and God is telling us that to get there we've got to follow him here first. And it feels impossible. As we turn to Scripture I invite you to turn on or open your copy of Scripture, and as a gesture of respect and honor, let's stand together for the hearing of God's Word.

Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in. ² And the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. ³ You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. ⁴ Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. ⁵ And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when 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,^[a] and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him."

Well Joshua and the battle of Jericho. This is one of those passages that is familiar to so many of us, it probably brings back memories of Vacation Bible School and little kids marching around a cardboard box city and when they shout a leader knocks it all down. We all know the song *Joshua 'fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the wall came a-tumbling down*. No doubt this story of God's people the Israelites doing the impossible is the stuff adorable moments with kids are made of.

But is it also something much more? Is it also profoundly hopeful and instructive, especially today as we celebrate Ascension Sunday, and especially in this period of isolation and uncertainty in our lives?

Without a doubt we live in the most advanced time in human history, more technological advancement has taken place in the last 150 years than all human history combined. Advances in communication, transportation, energy, automation, medicine. We have mastered much of the physical world, understanding its nature and harnessing it so that seemingly very little is beyond our reach. So it is really tempting to believe that we can overcome every obstacle. With the right skill,

education, strength, determination, and time we can master about anything. And if we're really stuck and we need to seek divine intervention, well then God is always there with that little bit of spiritual magic to help push us over the line.

At first glance Joshua 6 looks like a perfect example of this very notion. But I want to caution our read of it, because I believe this passage says something entirely different. It's all about God.

So, for this message I want to break this passage into 3 parts for our consideration: A City, A Strategy, A Future.

First of all, A City and a Calling.

As the Israelites crossed the Jordan, watching God once again show up and part the water, their future is now seemingly within arms-reach. But now in between them and their destination, the Promised Land lies one more impossible obstacle, Jericho.

God makes a habit of leading us right up to the things in life that truly are impossible, and says: "goahead!" Israel, once again received their calling, and it was impossible. Maybe they're getting used to it by now.

Now, to give you a bit of history, Jericho is a city that has been around since 9,000 BC, it is the oldest city in the world, and it's still in existence. To give you a sense of how ancient it is, the Pyramids of Giza were built in 2,000 BC. By the time Joshua and the Israelites face the city it had been around for nearly 5,000 years. To put it in context for just how old it is, the British Empire lasted 500 years; the Roman Empire for 1,000 years. The city of Jericho is 11,000 years old.

The city itself was about 8.5 sq km, and was surrounded by 2 walls, an outer wall that was 6 feet thick—this is likely where the home of Rahab was located and what enabled her to communicate with the Israelite spies. Then a second inner wall that was 12 feet thick. At the center of the city protected by these walls was a spring that served as an Oasis in the middle of a dry barren wilderness.

Joshua 6 begins **Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the people of Israel**. Now it's not clear whether the city is shut up for fear of the Israelites, or whether they're doing just fine as they are not particularly interested in welcoming outsiders. As a community and a society, Jericho was self-reliant. They didn't have much interest in anything outside their own physical, social, economic, or religious walls. This is an image that's not only relevant because of the crisis and concern we're facing with Coronavirus, but in a more meta approach, this image of a society locked down is one that is discussed at length by the Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor as he looks at the religious life of Western society.

Taylor says that we have become a "buffered" people. Advances of modern science and technology, communication and economics that have enabled much larger segments of society to amass large sums of wealth, and communities that promote privatization and security in a way that we never have before as humans. We have become, what Taylor calls, a buffered people. Not only have we become more individualized and autonomous, buffered from those around us, our understanding of the universe has now led us to be buffered and closed off to the need for a transcendent God to have access to our inner lives. We are now free to disengage.

Taylor writes: “It is easy for people to disengage because, in a sense, the buffered self is assumed to be stronger than God. The buffered self is so protected behind its hedges that the power of God, while maybe acknowledged at some level, is un-needed. There was a time when people felt weak and vulnerable and that their inner lives needed God’s power. Today, the buffered self believes it is free (making it a right) as he says, “to not give a crap” and assume a state of invulnerability.”

It’s not that they’re opposed and express that opposition with hostility, it’s just that they’re, “meh.” Why would I care to inconvenience myself with a call to go out of my way to serve the poor, take care of the needy, advocate for justice, risk social dislocation and alienation, when I am well hedged in my own little world of comfort protection? The greatest challenge it seems is not hostile resistance, but apathy.

And perhaps this is what the Israelites faced before them as they approached the city of Jericho. “Meh, who is this God, why would we fear when we are protected by these walls and have all that we could ever need in here. Thanks, but no thanks.”

But Israel is not given the option of going around Jericho. Canaan is right on the other side of the city. For all intents and purposes, they’ve arrived, why not just avoid it by going around it, leaving it as it is, and starting our new life as God’s people over here—while the Moon-god worshipping Jericho folks are over there?

This is the challenge for so many of these Old Testament passages that involve conquest and the elimination of cities and people. What do we do with these? Well on the one hand we can look at the way warfare among tribal people like this took place. It’s how everyone did it. One group conquers another and kills the other to prevent future insurrection. So Israel was not unique in this sense. But what they did have is Yahweh who was with them and who desired that his law, worship, and community be the rule in his lands. As creator Yahweh was jealous for his people and was not willing to share them with other, lesser gods. And Israel was his ambassador, God’s picture for the world of what it meant to live as God’s people.

Second: A Strategy

Israel had arrived at the next step of their journey with God from slavery to freedom. And along the path, at moments when they lost sight of God’s presence and leading with them, Israel took little detours following their own route. And each detour set them back a little bit, and reminded them that God was giving the directions. But now they had come to the walls of Jericho: “Ok God, what next?”

We all face impossible moments in life, and this was yet another impossible scenario for Israel. But God’s instruction to them, the strategy they were to follow laid out in verse 3:

You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. ⁴Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets.

Interestingly, this military tactic of marching around and yelling wasn’t unknown. Old Testament Scholar Robert Coote notes that this battle was made up of “guerilla tactics” which involved “feint,

deception, display, discipline, and surprise.” He calls the seven day march a “mostly normal military procedure.” But what made Israel’s use of this tactic unique is that their march around the city was done in silence.

Now those of you who have children or grandchildren are probably familiar with Veggie Tales. It’s a common DVD or CD in our minivan. Fortunately or unfortunately I’ve seen very few of them, and have only heard the songs—ad nauseum. Maybe you remember the Jericho song, Peas atop the wall mocking the Israelite gods, cucumbers, and tomatoes. “Keep walking, cause you won’t knock down our wall, keep walking, cause it isn’t going to fall, it’s plain to see your brains are very small, to think walking will be knocking down our wall.”

What stood before them was impossible for them, they weren’t knocking anything down. But that didn’t mean God didn’t call them to obey and respond in faith. So how did God instruct them to respond.

1 Show up and face it. The famous quote commonly attributed to Woody Allen goes 80% of life is just showing up. God instructs Israel to start by just showing up.

My Father in law was in the military during Vietnam, he served here in the states in Augusta GA on a base there. And unfortunately, was injured during his time, receiving medical discharge. When he and the other discharges were preparing for departure, they were each handed a large stack of paperwork to fill out. It was thick. Many disregarded it, wanting just to get out. But Merle decided to sit down and go through each piece of information and fill out all the necessary documents. Well turns out that one of those documents was about disabled veteran’s dependents education. And by simply showing up and filling out one piece of paper, Amy, and her brothers David and John were each entitled to 4 years of Indiana public university schooling at no charge. It literally pays to show up.

2 Put one foot in front of the other. Walking silently around the city, was literally the least intimidating thing they could do. It may have been strange or eerie, but there was no demonstration of power or aggression that would have been the least bit intimidating to the forces of Jericho. God simply called Israel to show up and step up.

3 Be obedient with what you have. I love this image of the Israelites walking around and around and then finally on the seventh day after the seventh lap they all shouted. In other words, the only weapon they were called upon to use was their voice. Now with their voice alone, the sound waves, or reverberations would cause the walls to fall. The miracle and the lesson in faith is that Israel was called upon to follow, and to speak out and God did the work. As disciples of Jesus our most powerful tool is our voice in prayer, testimony, witness, and in peacemaking. We often will ask the question: “What can I do? What can one person, or one small act, or one small voice do in the face of such opposition?” These are not our questions to ask. All we are asked to do is be faithful to use the tool God has given us to speak.

Mr Rogers before congress.

I can imagine that the Israelites as they were walking around the city, staring up at its ramparts thinking to themselves: how impossible the task is; how overwhelming the structure is; how ill equipped they were for that into which they were being led, and on and on. But what God was

calling and asking of the Israelites was for them to show up, walk around, and use what they did have—and for them it was their voice. And the Israelites believed it wasn't more than what it was, it may not have been their physical yell that brought the walls down, but God's miraculous working in it. But they also didn't believe their voice was less than it was either. They didn't quiver and second guess and choose to doubt and therefore not use their voice in the way that God had called them.

Your voice, and God's Spirit can move mountains. Jesus voice to the man who was lame for 38 years at the Pool of Bethesda gave him his legs back. The words of Peter's sermon at Pentecost caused 3,000 to be baptized. Stephen's words before the high priest would get him stoned in Acts 6, but it was his words as rocks were raining down on him "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" that would be heard by a Pharisee named Saul who would later become Paul the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Our words are not more than they are, but they are certainly not less than they are either. But with God's Spirit they are transformative, walls of hostility, of prejudice, of violence, of racism, of envy, of unforgiveness, these walls can tumble on down when met by Spirit filled words.

But that is exactly what Jericho represents for us. Lastly, a Future. Jericho is whatever it is in life standing before us that's impossible, and also unavoidable. Jericho is the thing God is leading you into, your future, your calling.

The point of this story is not: trust in God and he'll help you do it yourself. The point is that there are obstacles in life that are precisely impossible, things you cannot overcome—and may not. But the point for us in our development as God's people is not necessarily victory, but faithfulness. Show up, put one foot in front of the other, keep God's presence before you in faith, and use what you have.

There's a real danger in interpreting this passage through our lens of triumphalism. God's giving us the strength and the righteous calling to conquer. All sorts of bad things have happened in the name of God with this motive. There's an underlying attitude among all of us I'm sure that if we just have enough time (way I see it we're not even through our first lap around the city with this Covid thing) we will be able to conquer this thing like we've conquered everything else before.

But there's one thing we haven't conquered yet, death. There's no vaccine for that one, we haven't solved that greatest riddle of them all. At every step of this road the Israelites have been on they've been as good as dead, and so maybe what God was teaching them about was how to be prepared to die well in order that they could fully live.

This Sunday is Ascension Sunday, in just a few moments we will say that Creed together. And there is a line in the Creed that says He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. Do you notice the posture of the risen and ascended Jesus? Seated, at ease, relaxed, in full authority. He's not pacing around heaven, wringing his hands wondering what will happen to us next. God is not worried, so neither should we worry. It's God who controls the outcome, it's God who is Lord over your life, will you relinquish that job and give it to the one who will it anyways and simply walk forward. Because people who know that they're dead already don't scare easily, and because people who know the one who is seated on the throne of the universe—and that means over their lives too—are people who know how to truly live.