

The Story Series: Week 7
Joshua The Battle Begins
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Can you think of a time of your life when you were facing an overwhelming challenge? It was right there in front of you, and you knew that you had to confront it, but you were scared to death! Maybe you are in that moment right now, where you are facing some challenge and you need to charge at it, but you question whether or not you have what it takes. Fear has overcome you.

You have two choices: advance or retreat. Hit it head on, or cower in defeat.

Today as we take a look at the life story of Joshua, the children of Israel are faced with the same dilemma. They stand before an overwhelming challenge: the city of Jericho. It is now their moment. After 600 years of waiting, it is finally time for them to enter into the land of Canaan, to take possession of the land that God promised to them. Six hundred years earlier, God spoke to an old man named Abraham, and promised that he would make his family into a great nation, and that one day he would give the land of Canaan for his family to settle in.

As we have seen, much has happened between Abraham and Joshua. We've traveled all the way over to Egypt, then down to Mt. Sinai, and we've wandered in the wilderness for 40 long years. But finally, God's people stand on the border of the Promised Land. It is their moment.

But there's a problem. There are already people who possess that Land. That shouldn't surprise us, knowing how fertile the land is – a land flowing with milk and honey. The people who are currently there are like giants – really, really tall people – and there are LOTS of them. They are wicked people, the Bible says, people who wouldn't think twice about chopping your head off if you tried to take their property.

To make matters worse, the people have also built a thick, tall wall around the main city of Jericho to help them defend off anyone who would try to take the land away from them. You can imagine how intimidated the Israelites must have felt seeing all of this. Remember, 40 years prior, when Moses sent 12 spies into this land, many of them came back and said, "We're doomed! There's no way we will be able to overthrow them and take over the land!"

Now under the leadership of young Joshua, they are faced with the same challenge again. But Joshua has a much different attitude, and a much different game plan. In the open chapters of the Old Testament book of Joshua, God speaks to Joshua over and over again and says to him, "Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous." But how in the world could they be strong and courageous knowing what they had to face? All of the odds were stacked against them.

But God gives them two “weapons”, if you will, that will enable them to be successful in their conquest of the land. In Joshua chapter 1, God instructs Joshua to meditate on God’s Word day and night, so that he will always live by God’s commands. “Then you will be successful,” God tells Joshua. So the first weapon God gives to his people is his Holy Word. Be people of the Word, God tells them. “Know my will; live by my ways.”

If you read through the reading guide this week from the book of Joshua, you know that the only time the Israelites were *unsuccessful* in conquering the various cities was in the second conquest of the city of Ai found in Joshua 7. They were unsuccessful because an individual named Achan violated the clear instruction of God’s Word to not keep any of the property from the people they were conquering.

While in Jericho, Achan just happened to put a couple valuables in his pocket, as souvenirs. Because of Achan’s violation of not living according to God’s teachings, the Lord allowed the people of Ai to defeat the Israelites in that one battle. It’s the only time they were defeated – when they chose not to live by the ways of God. Did you hear that? The only time God’s people were defeated is when they chose not to live by the ways of God.

That’s how important it is for us to know what God’s Word says and to faithfully live by God’s teachings. It determines whether we will experience the thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat. After God’s people get off track, after they disregard God’s clear instructions, God tells Joshua to call all of the people together and they have a kind of renewal service to remember the paths that lead to life, and those that lead to death.

Joshua 8:34 reads, “Joshua then read to them all the blessings and curses Moses had written. Every word of every command that Moses had ever given was read to the entire assembly of Israel.” To avoid another Achan situation, they read God’s Word, they meditated on it day and night, and Joshua exhorted them to live by the Lord’s teachings. God’s Word would be their first “weapon” of defense.

It is vitally important for Christians to be people of the Word. It’s the main reason God commands us in the Third Commandment to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. God wants us to set aside Sunday so that we can hear once again his commands and promises to us. All of us need to be reminded again and again what God says in the Word. It’s one of the dangers of not being regular in our worship attendance. We start to forget. The world out there can be a very tempting place. We can easily be led astray without even knowing it. We need to make Sunday morning worship a priority so that we can stay centered on God. Otherwise, an “Achan situation” might arise where we find ourselves living out of sync with the ways of God. Remember Moses’ exhortation to us last week. There are two choices: one way leads to life and blessings; the other to curses and death. Making Sunday worship a priority guards us against making the wrong choices.

The second “weapon” of divine warfare guaranteeing victory for God’s people is that they needed to be people of prayer. God tells Joshua that you can be strong and courageous because I, the Lord your God, will be going with you wherever you go (by means of the Ark of the Covenant.)

However,” God says, “before you go, you need to talk with me to make sure that I’m in on it, to verify if it is truly my will. If it is my will, I will go ahead of you to prepare the way for victory.”

Hear those words: If God does not go ahead of us to prepare the way, then our endeavors will ultimately fail. Before we make any request, before we set out on any endeavor, we need to constantly go to God in prayer to discern if it is truly God’s will.

As the Israelites go about conquering the various cities in the land of Canaan, God tells his people to always put the Ark of the Covenant out front and then to let the Israelite soldiers follow behind. The Ark, of course, represents the presence of God among his people. That is a beautiful image that reminds us that as we live out our lives, God always needs to go before us. God needs to lead the way. And knowing that God goes before us to prepare the way, we can be strong and courageous in our faith, for we know we do not journey alone.

After God conquers the entire land of Canaan, he wills that land to the Israelites to honor the promise he made to his people many generations before. Then God tells them *why* he has blessed them with such a great gift. We most certainly know that God is not giving the Israelites the land because of their righteousness or integrity! We’ve read the story; we know better! No, the reason God is giving them the land is that God wants to establish his name in Canaan so that all people can come to know Him as the one, true God.

It’s really important we get this. Through his people – now loving in the land of Canaan – God is establishing his identity and presence so that all the other people and nations in the surrounding areas will look at the success of the nation of Israel and want to get to know them. This will allow the nation of Israel to share their story, to tell how the one true, God of heaven and earth has chosen to become involved in their lives. And through the Israelites sharing their story, other peoples and nations will come to know that God loves them as well, and desires a relationship with them also. God wants to make his name known in the land of Canaan in hopes that others will see God at work through the lives of the Israelites and desire to become a part of God’s people.

So what does this ancient story have to do with our modern-day lives? I believe that God wants to make his name known in Sherman, Texas... and in Denison, Pottsboro, Whitesboro, in Bells, Savoy, Whitewright, wherever we find ourselves. God wants to make his name known in this area. And listen to this: God wants to make his name known in this community **through his relationship with us** so that through our lives, others might come to know the one, true God. God is inviting US, just like God invited Joshua and the Israelites, God is inviting US to be strong and courageous.

As individuals and as a church, as we face this GIANT calling of being the people of God in this community, God asks us to be strong and courageous. God is calling us to make him known in every neighborhood, in every apartment complex, in every business and school. God wants us to share our story with others, how God named and claimed us in the waters of Holy Baptism, how we have entrusted our lives to the one, true God and have not been

disappointed. God calls us to generously offer our lives – our time, talents, and treasures – so that others might experience the good and gracious nature of God.

Through the people of Trinity Lutheran Church, God desires to make himself known to the rest of this community. This is one of the reasons God brought this community of faith into existence – so that others might sense the power of God at work in our lives and want to become a part of God’s family. We are to be witnesses to the power of God at work in our lives and in this community. Just as God gave the Israelites the city of Jericho, so we should pray that God would give us this city so that God’s will and ways would not only be known but celebrated and lived out in this community.

Here in Sunday worship we claim Almighty God as the one true God. We express our love and devotion to God by setting aside time to focus on his Word, and by offering God our songs of praise, and our tithes and offerings. But we must find a way to carry over what we do on Sunday into the rest of the week. Faith is a verb, not a noun. Faith is something we do, live out. Faith that is merely talked about is not faith at all. We must take a risk and walk across the room, walk across the street and engage others with the love of Jesus Christ. This is our calling as the people of God.

You know as well as I how gifted the members of this congregation are. God has blessed us with powerful gifts and talents to equip us to go out into the world to share the love of Christ with others. God unleashes our giftedness out into the world so that others might come to know him as the one, true God. And as God sends us out, he commissions us to be strong and courageous. “For I am giving you the city,” God assures us.

There is an entire mission field out there. There are people in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our schools who do not have a personal relationship with the one, true God. God desires to change that. And God will bring about that change through us, through you and me. In order to be effective in claiming this city for God, we need to have two weapons. It’s the same two powerful weapons God gave to Joshua and the Israelites. First, we must be people of the Word. Before we set out, we need to center our lives on the holy Word of God. We need to be certain of what the will of God is and desire to live out God’s ways in our daily lives.

It’s one of my motivations for offering this 21-week series on the Old Testament. We need to have a working knowledge of the Scriptures. We need to know the story of God, and know it well. We need to first discover the heart and story of God in order that we can give faithful testimony to others as to the will and ways of God. If this *Story* series just turns out to be a nice little sermon series, then it has all been in vain. This series is meant to better equip us to be more effective witnesses for God out in the world. This is faith training. Remember, God desires to give us the city. But in order to be rightly prepared to go out and lead others to Christ we all have to have a working knowledge of God’s *Story*. It’s the only way that it’s going to work, God tells us today.

The second weapon God has given to us is the weapon of prayer. We need to be in an ongoing conversation with God to make sure that he is in on it before we go. Now I can

brag a little bit because Trinity Lutheran Church is a praying church. So many people have commented to me that it seems like we have a direct line to God. And we do. We are people who believe that prayer changes things. But let's not forget that prayer changes us as well.

So often we have a carefully laid out plan for our lives. But we must stop and ask, "Is it *God's* plan for my life?" Becoming a pastor was not part of my life plan. Adopting a child had never even crossed my mind. But both were part of God's plan for my life. And how much easier it would have been if, instead of informing God of my carefully thought out plans and asking him to bless my plan, I would have surrendered myself over to God and prayed, "O God, what is your will for my life? What plans do you have for me? How will you use my life to help others experience your grace and mercy?"

Remember prayer is simply having a conversation with God. And conversation implies both speaking and listening. Yes, God wants us to share with him our joys and sorrows, but God also wants us to listen to him, and to trust in his divine wisdom. Remember what God told Joshua and the Israelites. "Before you go into the next city, you need to talk with me to make sure that I'm in on it, to verify if it is truly my will. If it *is* my will, I will go ahead of you to prepare the way for victory." In order for us to be God's faithful people out in the world, we must be people of prayer. We must be in constant conversation with God, asking God to show us what his plan is for our lives.

Every morning before a pastor friend of mine gets out of bed, he prays to God, "O God, whatever person needs encouragement this day, whoever is struggling with their faith, if someone is hungry or thirsty, allow me to bump into them so that I may reach out and remind them of your love and faithfulness. Use me as a vessel to bring hope and healing to this world!"

WOW! Can you imagine if each and every one of us would start our day with that prayer, and then became perceptive as to whom God sends our way. We would be people who would literally change the world. We would become the people God has created us to be. We would be people who would take the city for the glory of God.

At the end of Joshua's life, he stood before the people of Israel and said, "Today you must choose the God you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Will we echo Joshua's words in our daily life by the choices we make and the priorities we keep?

"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Let us make it so! Amen.