

March 3, 2024 Sermon Manuscript

Joshua 6:1-5,12-21, 24-27 (NIV)

6:¹ Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

² Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.”

¹² Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. ¹³ The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the Lord and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets kept sounding. ¹⁴ So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the Lord has given you the city! ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.”

²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

²⁴ Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord’s house. ²⁵ But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

²⁶ At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: “Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho:

“At the cost of his firstborn son
he will lay its foundations;
at the cost of his youngest
he will set up its gates.”

²⁷ So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.

Joshua 13:1-7, 23:1-8 (NIV)

13:¹ When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.

² “This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites, ³ from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite though held by the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron; the territory of the Avvites ⁴ on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sidonians as far as Aphek and the border of the Amorites; ⁵ the area of Byblos; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo Hamath.

⁶ “As for all the inhabitants of the mountain regions from Lebanon to Misrephoth Maim, that is, all the Sidonians, I myself will drive them out before the Israelites. Be sure to allocate this land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have instructed you, ⁷ and divide it as an inheritance among the nine tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh.”

...

23:¹ After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, ² summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: “I am very old. ³ You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. ⁴ Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵ The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.

⁶ “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. ⁷ Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. ⁸ But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.

Israel’s Conquest, Pt. 1: The Minority Report

Well, one of the subjects we’ve given attention to this Lent is the Violence of God in the Old Testament, which includes accounts of both God doing violence *Himself* as well as God commanding His people to carry out violence against others. And at our first Lenten Wednesday night teaching, I shared a tool, or a framework, for grappling with the violence of God in the Old Testament derived from the work of theologian Chris Green,¹ which I’ve summarized briefly on your insert.

¹ Video and manuscript at www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/ot-violence

- Green warns against taking the first option listed, which people frequently do take, of figuratively tearing out these uncomfortable passages of scripture by either just ignoring them or concluding that the God in the Old Testament is different - a different God with a different character - than God revealed in the New Testament in Jesus.

Meanwhile, the next three options (B-D) each have strengths and weaknesses. These options respond to the passages of violence by concluding that...

- (Option B:) God is God and we are not, and His ways are higher than our ways,² so either we shouldn't question Him or we should just assume that God isn't actually as bad as He may seem in a given passage - that God remains good - but it just remains a mystery as to how.
- Or, option C: God revealed himself gradually in the Bible - so Old Testament characters may not have always heard God right or God may have even allowed them to only partially understand His will.
- Or, option D: that there may be more than meets the eye going on, whether because the way something is described is not *precisely what happened in history* or because God or the writer of scripture could actually just be telling an Old Testament parable of sorts with some passages in the Old Testament, rather than something that happened in history.

But because none of these three options are fully adequate on their own, what Green suggests is the best approach for grappling with passages portraying God as either causing or commanding violence in the Old Testament is what I've labeled as Option E: to leave behind the first approach and integrate the last three options, but with an emphasis on considering how it relates to Jesus. You see, the good news is that because Jesus is God incarnate and we can trust that He is the fullest & most accurate revelation of what God is really like, this means that when Old Testament scriptures cause us to question God's goodness, we can be confident that there is more to be revealed than we have been able to grasp.

So, two Sundays ago, I ventured to take Green's approach - option E - in grappling with a story of God carrying out violence Himself, in the Flood narrative of Genesis 6 to 9. I didn't mention I was employing Green's approach, but that's implicitly what I was doing. And now, today, I want to grapple with violence God commands His people to carry out by employing Green's approach with respect to Israel's conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan led by Joshua. [[Although, there may be more to follow, with another angle next week. Sometimes the way something in the Old Testament relates to Jesus is multi-layered!]]

People often point to stories from Israel's conquest, like the Fall of Jericho that was read this morning, where God seems to have commanded His people to carry out gratuitous violence. After all, if you look at Moses' words from Deuteronomy 7 included on your insert,³ in verse 2 God seems to pretty

² Isaiah 55:8-9 - "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

³ Deuteronomy 7:1-6,21-26 (NIV)

(Moses said to the people of Israel) ¹ When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you— ² and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. ³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. ⁵ This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. ⁶ For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession...

²¹ Do not be terrified by them, for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God. ²² The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you. ²³ But the Lord your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed. ²⁴ He will give their kings into your hand, and you will wipe out their names from under heaven. No one will be able to stand up against you; you will destroy them. ²⁵ The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God. ²⁶ Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction. Regard it as vile and utterly detest it, for it is set apart for destruction.

clearly tell the Israelites through Moses that when He brings them into the land and they encounter other nations they are to “*destroy them totally*”. And verses 4 & 5 in that passage explains that this is because these other nations worship different gods, so if Israel kept them around these nations would lead them to worship their idols instead of the one true God. So, in today’s reading from Joshua 6, total destruction seems to be exactly what the Israelites did to Jericho, as verse 21 says they “devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.” Yikes!

But, as I said, the good news is that because Jesus is God incarnate and we can trust that He is the fullest & most accurate revelation of what God is really like, this means that when Old Testament scriptures cause us to question God’s goodness, we can be confident that there is more to be revealed than we have been able to grasp. Now, sometimes the more-to-be-revealed isn’t fully attainable - God doesn’t promise we’ll be able to garner *all* the answers to our difficult questions about scripture, though I have found time and again that when I bring my difficult questions before God, He usually leads me to answers - or at least different & helpful perspectives - in due time. And, in regard to our discomfort with the conquest described in the book of Joshua, I do think much of it can be allayed by following Green’s approach and learning from the work of scholar Matthew Lynch, whose research and writing focuses on the violence in the Old Testament.

When grappling with how to make sense of violent texts, Lynch emphasizes the importance of reading the biblical texts slowly & carefully, and expecting to be surprised. Well, we don’t really have the space to do that together here, but luckily Matthew Lynch has done a lot of slow reading of these texts for us, and we may find some of the results surprising! #

Perhaps the most significant insight Lynch offers is that upon examining all the scriptures about Israel’s Conquest of Canaan, what becomes evident pretty quickly is that for every account of total destruction, like we read of Jericho in 6:21, there are accounts that tell a contrary story or paint a different picture of what really happened.

- First, there are scriptures that reveal that there were enormous portions of the Promised Land that Israel did not conquer at all. As our reading from chapter 13 opens with God saying to Joshua, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.” On your insert is a map which uses darker shading to show the territories Israel actually captured in the north and south. And in the section we read from chapter 23, God is instructing the Israelites on how to live faithfully moving forward with foreign peoples living all around them. Indeed, the book of Judges, which comes after the book of Joshua, is all about how Israel *struggled* to remain faithful to God in the Promised Land and how the presence and threat of these other peoples kept driving them back to the Lord.
- But, in addition to this, there are multiple instances where the book of Joshua had indicated that Israel destroyed entire populations, but then Joshua and Judges *later* indicate that



Map of the result of the result of Israel’s Conquest, with darker shading indicating where Israel had controlled after Joshua chapter 11, from Matthew Lynch’s *Flood & Fury*.

Canaanites still held the power in those cities after those battles.⁴ So clearly the reports of total destruction were exaggerated.

So, Lynch concludes that scripture's description of the Conquest include what he calls a Majority Report and a Minority Report. The Majority Report includes tales of utter and complete conquest, like the Fall of Jericho and the Defeat of Ai and so on, which seem to fulfill the Lord's command in Deuteronomy 7:2 for the Israelites to "totally destroy" the people they encountered living in the land. And these accounts, by the way, are what most readers assume generally happened. But then, there is the Minority Report, which seems to follow what Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 7:22: that "The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little." These scriptures indicate that the so-called conquest was *far* from ever being completed and that the accounts of entire Canaanite groups being wiped off the map could be exaggerated.⁵

In fact, in the case of Jericho, it's important to note that while we may be prone to imagine a "bustling metropolis," archaeological findings and research into other ancient texts indicate that the "city" of Jericho was more likely a military outpost⁶ - a citadel - with perhaps a hundred soldiers and very few women or children.⁷ And maybe more on that next week.

However, it would seem there was **more than meets the eye** going on with the accounts of Israel's conquest - option D - and it wasn't likely as inhumane as some passages might give us the impression it was. Indeed, the over-the-top violence in the Majority Report accounts seem to be a bit of caricature of what the Minority Report indicates really happened.

But we may wonder why the Bible would include such a violent caricature of what really happened? Well, this is where it can be illuminating to know that scholars are actually very confident that the book of Joshua is an account of the conquest that was probably edited and finalized almost a thousand years later,⁸ when the people of Israel had been exiled and living under foreign rule, like the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. This is significant because by that time the people of Israel

⁴ Lynch: "Israel supposedly destroyed populations entirely (according to the Majority Report), many Canaanites still remained. Though Israel had allegedly destroyed Zephath (or Hormah, Num 21:3), Hebron (Josh 10:36-37), and Debir (Josh 10:39), Joshua and Judges later indicate Canaanites still held those cities after those battles (Josh 14:6-15; 15:15; Judg 1:10-11, 17). In other cases, Israel defeated the kings of cities like Jerusalem, Dor, Taanach, and Megiddo (Josh 12:8-10, 21-23), but later could not even enter them because they were occupied by Canaanites (Josh 17:12; 2 Sam 5:6-8)! Clearly the defeat of kings involved the survival of their subjects, and likely the emergence of new Canaanite rulers. One more example. In Joshua 10:33 we're told that "Horem king of Gezer had come up to help Lachish, but Joshua defeated him and his army—until no survivors were left." The "no survivors" may refer to the army that came and fought in the open, and not to the inhabitants of Gezer itself. In any case, we learn later that the Ephraimites "did not dislodge the Canaanites living in Gezer; to this day the Canaanites live among the people of Ephraim but are required to do forced labor" (Josh 16:10). The list goes on. [The examples from this paragraph were cited in Webb and Oeste, *Bloody*, 156-58.]"

⁵ As Lynch says: "There may have been isolated battles in which Canaanites groups were wiped off the map, but those weren't the norm."

⁶ Protecting from attack from the East.

⁷ Lynch adds: "The historical realities surrounding Jericho's demise were likely more complicated. Joshua even suggests as much. Joshua 24 reports that the people of Jericho came out and fought Israel when they crossed the Jordan and arrived at Jericho (Josh 24:11). We never hear of such hostility from the inhabitants of Jericho in Joshua 6.31 Joshua 6 suggests that Israel assaulted an otherwise besieged people. The idea of a hostile response to Israel's arrival fits with other battle accounts in the book (see below). But the account in Joshua 6 is probably designed to do more than just report history. Even if Joshua 24:11 is a summary of all campaigns in Josh 6-11, it only highlights the symbolic weight attached to Jericho, and the fact that it represented more than itself in Israel's memory. Somehow, all future battles were contained in Jericho."

⁸ Lynch: "Some early interpreters thought Joshua wrote most of the book except his death (Josh 24:29-33).³⁵ However, clues in the book suggest a later date. "To this day" statements in Joshua place the book at the earliest during the time of the monarchy. For instance, Joshua 15:63 states that the Jebusites live among the Judeans in Jerusalem "to this day." Since Judeans didn't occupy Jerusalem until the time of David, the book dates to that point at the earliest. The city lists in Joshua 15:21-62 and 18:21-28 fit squarely in the monarchic period, perhaps in the ninth century BC.³⁶ While some of these cities (only about 40 percent) were occupied in the Late Bronze Age, when Israel emerged in the land, 100 percent were occupied in the Iron II (Monarchic) period. In short, it seems likely that the book initially took shape during the monarchy, and then received its final shape during the exile or shortly after.³⁸ That doesn't mean the book doesn't include earlier stories. It undoubtedly does! However, it does mean that the book was likely composed for a time when the literal destruction of Canaanites was not possible or pursued."

would've had no military at their disposal and no means to carry out or replicate any of the violence the Majority Report describes. As disturbing as that final verse from Psalm 137 today was⁹ - where the Psalmist writes, “⁹ Blessed shall he be who takes your children and throws them against the stones” (those are Babylonian children, by the way) - this Psalm *from that* time of exile in Babylon shows how powerless and even hopeless Israel felt in captivity. And so, the themes of the Majority report, with the way God fights for Israel and is faithful to His promises, would likely have been enormously encouraging to the audience it was originally edited for - who were in exile in Babylon - while the importance of being obedient to God and uncompromising with surrounding culture would have been critical to their survival. Now, certainly the violent stories those messages are packaged in falls short of what we see in Christ, but remember Option C: that [God revealed himself gradually in the Bible](#) and only fully in the coming of Christ.

So, not only was the conquest likely not as inhumane as some passages seem to indicate, but even where citizens of Jericho or other Canaanites might *have* met an unjust death, because we know Jesus shows us what God is really like, we can trust that if not in life or at least the afterlife God dealt both justly and mercifully with the real human lives represented in these stories. I'm reminded of how we read a few weeks ago from First Peter that when Jesus died and descended to the dead, He went and preached the gospel to those who had died for their wickedness in the Flood.¹⁰ [We know that God is good, even if many of His ways remain a mystery to us: Option B.](#) And trusting this allows us to put this concern aside and consider what the accounts in these scriptures are meant to be revealing to us about our discipleship to Jesus now/today. And so, *that's* what I want to consider in just a final few minutes here.

You see, the two types of stories in Joshua (and Judges) - the Majority Report and the Minority Report of the conquest - are meant to be read together and in tension with one another, and to speak to the tension each of us experience as disciples of Jesus who are seeking to live into our new identity in Christ while still struggling with sin. The good news that the Majority & Minority Reports point to for our journey with Christ is that the grace of God in Christ is *more than sufficient to forgive the ways we continue to live captive to idols*, even if we'll still incur some earthly consequences, while He leads us to become more singularly devoted to God a step at a time, and therefore progressively & gradually becoming more like Him.

If I can explain...

You see, the Majority Report of the Conquest was all about wiping out the other nations because their false gods would be a snare to Israel. And what the Majority Report points to is how the Lord's victory over sin in our lives can only occur to the extent that we are aiming to become singular in our allegiance to Jesus and willing to surrender up our idols of wealth, empire politics, addictive escapisms

⁹ Psalm 137 (The New Coverdale Psalter - BCP 2019)

¹ By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, * when we remembered you, O Zion.

² As for our harps, we hung them up * upon the trees that are therein.

³ For those who led us away captive required of us a song and melody in our heaviness: * “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

⁴ How shall we sing the Lord's song * in the land of our captivity?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, * let my right hand forget its skill.

⁶ If I do not remember you, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, * if I prefer not Jerusalem above my dearest joy.

⁷ Remember the children of Edom, O Lord, in the day of Jerusalem, * how they said, “Down with it, down with it, even to the ground.”

⁸ O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery, * happy shall be the one who rewards you as you have done to us.

⁹ Blessed shall he be who takes your children * and throws them against the stones.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:18-22 - “¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”

and so on, which we so often choose over Him. So, the Majority report is meant to represent the posture we are to have toward the idols in our lives:¹¹ just as Deuteronomy 7:2 commanded Israel to be uncompromising in the destruction of their enemies (lest they be a snare to them), so our goal should be to partner with God ruthlessly rooting out the idolatry from our hearts/lives, trusting and believing that we'll be the better for it. Even if we have put our faith in Christ, the reality is that ***our hearts look a lot like this map***: with some parts that are surrendered to God and trusting His ways, but still many parts that struggle to follow His ways at all!

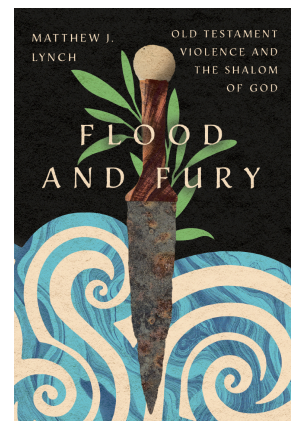
And so, the Minority Report points to this reality: that the transformation God desires to bring to our hearts cannot be received all at once, but instead comes through a lifelong struggle of partnership with God; just like Deuteronomy 7:22 said: God would drive out those foreign nations "little by little". It is significant that Lynch observes "Joshua never condemns the people for not settling all the land. It was simply a fact. It was part of the slow process by which God was giving Israel the land." And neither does the Lord condemn you and me. Instead, we can rest in His grace, which is *more than sufficient to forgive the ways we continue to live captive to idols*, even if we'll still incur some earthly consequences, while He leads us to become more singularly devoted to God a step at a time, and therefore progressively & gradually becoming more like Him.

And so, I wonder what part of this good news is the Spirit ministering to your heart on this Lenten Sunday?

If you are living in condemnation and shame for ways you're still really struggling to trust the Lord or abide in His ways, can you receive His compassion in the Minority Report: that you are exactly as God expected you would be and He's not mad at all.

Or, if you're tired of the emptiness that comes through a life and hope set on wealth or politics or escapism, will you ask Him to help you begin to root it out - to show you some steps you can take to partner with Him - because you can't change your desires, but God can.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.



¹¹ And Lynch suggests that perhaps Jesus is up to something similar to the purpose of the Majority Report with the radically violent language He uses in Matthew 5:29-30: "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. . . . If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away" (Mt 5:29-30).