

“YOU HAVE NOT PASSED THIS WAY BEFORE”

V. “Jericho: Walking in Circles”

2-3-08
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Joshua 5:1-7; 13-16; 6:1-5

INTRODUCTION

Patsy Clairmont, who some of you know from “Women of Faith” conferences, tells of sending her six-year-old son, Jason out the door one day to wait for the school bus. A few minutes later, she heard the door open, and in walked Jason. “What are you doing back here?” Patsy asked. “I’ve quit school,” Jason boldly announced. “Quit school?” his mother responded. “Why have you quit school?” Without hesitation, Jason proclaimed, “It’s too long, it’s too hard, and it’s too boring!” “Jason,” Patsy replied, “you have just described life. Now go get on the bus!”

The every-day-ness of life is what so often gets to us, doesn’t it? It is true also of our Christian journey. It is not too hard to maintain a devotional time when things are fresh, when you are hearing from God, when His Word is alive and you are gaining new insights. But, when prayer feels dry, devoid of God’s presence and there seems to be nothing fresh and alive in the Bible, that’s when I most often get sporadic. I expect it is also a reason why some quit coming to church, or get quite irregular: it seems dull, boring, so routine. It is not exciting and stimulating like we think it should be. Have you ever said, rather discouraged in leaving a church service, “I didn’t get a thing out of it?” (Don’t raise your hands, please). But I know I’ve said it, or at least thought it if not said it.

The other day, I was with a group of ministers and we were talking about church services where we just felt like we were going through the motions. Everyone was saying they didn’t want that. But, as we were talking, I thought about this week’s sermon. While we don’t want to quit evaluating how we’re doing, I do believe we are not the measure of the value. AND, many times, we may not understand the connection between what we are doing at the command of the Lord and what God is doing in the spiritual realm.

As we turn to today’s Scripture, we can’t miss the elaborate, seemingly irrelevant preparation. The conquest of the promised land is often seen as an archetype of the Christian life and the spiritual warfare and battles we are called to fight. Yet, almost everything about it is contrary to our human intuition.

PREPARATION

We all know of the thrilling story of Jericho and the walls tumbling down, as well as the miraculous stopping of the River Jordan to allow Israel to cross. But, before each of these events, there is a lot of quiet getting ready. We’ve seen how God had to admonish Joshua four times in the first chapter to not be afraid, “for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (9)–

preparing him to lead. In chapter two, there is the provision of salvation made for Rahab, the ultimate outsider. Then, the amazing crossing of the Jordan. But, then things stop again in chapter 4 for building a memorial where they camp at Gilgal. This is on the West side of the Jordan— in the midst of enemy-occupied territory. Now, there is an even bigger stop, in chapter 5. READ Joshua 5:1-8

Does this make any sense? They've been camped for weeks on the other side of the Jordan. If they needed to be circumcised, certainly that was the time— not when they are surrounded by the enemy. That's when you need to be ready to fight, not incapacitated with sensitive surgery. You can imagine these warriors, charged for battle. The Jordan has parted for them. They are ready to conquer. But, God says, "Wait, get circumcised first." This is very indelicate. It is painful. It slows down the mightiest man. There is no way they can fight for awhile. You might note in your footnotes, the meaning of the place, Gibeath Haaraloth (vs. 3) means "hill of foreskins." Enough said! Talk about a momentum stopper!

Circumcision was God's commandment to Abraham (Gen. 17:10-11) for all his decedents— a consecration, setting them apart as belonging to God. Here was a clear command that Israel had totally neglected in their 40 years of wandering in the desert. But as things get ready for battle, God says it isn't okay to skip this. No, we have to back up and do what should have been done for your male babies on the prescribed eighth day. It was a prerequisite to participate in the Passover meal. It is a marking that every male is bound in service to the Lord. But its central meaning, its spiritual significance is as an outward sign of what God wants for our hearts. Through Moses, God says, *Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer* (Deut 10:16). Circumcision for everyone means cutting off sin, the sinful nature, and being wholly dedicated to God and His service. In the New Testament application, relevant to us, Col. 2:11 speaks of circumcision now done in our hearts by Christ— a spiritual transformation, sanctifying us. Circumcision of the heart means cutting away our pride, our confidence in our strength and abilities, and a removing of our sinful nature.

When God gets ready to do something big, as I've mentioned before, He generally begins by getting His people ready, purified, cleansed from sin. When the Holy Spirit begins to move in our hearts with powerful conviction, we should treat it as a wonderful gift. God is preparing us. How often, before an intense time of ministry, such as on a retreat, I've found the Holy Spirit bringing to my attention things I need to let go of, people I need to make something right with, or sins I hadn't even noticed. But, I also am thankful. For with renewed repentance and obedience, getting 100% yielded to the Lord and His purposes, I can then be a clear, unobstructed channel for ministry. And there is nothing more thrilling than that.

But sin and disobedience are basic and stand in the way of anything God wants to do. We don't get to skip over that. We don't get to ignore unforgiveness toward others. We need to put right the wrongs and not hold back any secret sins. That is what God is telling us in this. Israel needs to get this right before they can be effective in the battles ahead.

Here too is the reminder that their success doesn't depend upon their top-notch physical

condition as warriors. It is all dependent upon God and doing it His way.

JOSHUA AND THE COMMANDER— 5:13-15

This is an amazing scene. Everyone wants the Lord on their side, don't they? As Americans, we are accustomed to assuming God is on our side, for freedom, for our causes, for preserving our way of life. And of course Israel assumed God was always on their side. Joshua's question in meeting this heavenly warrior is revealing, (Josh 5:13b-14a):

Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come."

Rather than trying to get God on our side, we'd better ask and examine our hearts and be sure we're on His side. Are our hearts pure, are our motives right, and are we following Jesus in obedience? It is easy to look at those who oppose us and see how bad they are and assume God is certainly on our side. Remember, He's on nobody's side. He is the Commander. Be sure you are going with Him.

Then comes the command, Josh 5:15, *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."* God is holy. Remember, this whole journey began with Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5) receiving a similar command from the Lord to take off his sandals for he was on "holy ground." Now at the end of the journey as the conquest begins, Joshua must understand God is holy and he must stand in awe and respect of Him. Whether the man Joshua encounters here is a pre-incarnate visitation of the Son of God or an angel, we are not told. But, since angels do not encourage worship, many think this is none other than God's Son.

In that context of the presence of God, Joshua gets the battle plan.

THE BATTLE PLAN (6:1-5)

Can you imagine Joshua trying to explain this to his generals? Wouldn't you, if you were a soldier, feel silly doing this? Later in this same chapter it is clear the ark of the covenant, symbolic of the presence of God, is the centerpiece. There was a forward guard ahead of the priests and a rear guard behind the ark. The ark and the seven priests blowing trumpets were in the middle. Now you may picture this as a tuneful march, but these trumpets were made of ram's horns. There was no tuning and limited notes— so, we're just talking a cacophony of noise. So, once a day for six days, they circled the city and then went back to camp.

Did anyone say, "This is stupid. I'm going to sit this out? I'll join you on the last loop around the city on the seventh day, just in case this works." Day after day, walking in circles and nothing is happening.

Do you wonder about Rahab? They have promised to save her and her family if they all gathered in her house with the scarlet cord hanging from the window. The first day she gets all the relatives to come. Nothing happens. Then day two. By the sixth day, where do you think her credibility was?

Craig Barnes had a sermon on this at the Whitworth Institute a few years ago from which I took the “walking in circles” part of my title. He pointed how much of our ministry feels like this—circling around. It is almost like a liturgical act— in fact it is. Week after week, we come to worship. We sing hymns, listen to Scripture, pray, hear a sermon. Is anything really happening? In your devotional life, is God really hearing your prayers? Is it doing any good? It all can seem so ordinary. And, in our own spiritual progress, often it feels we’re walking in circles. We think we’re overcoming some besetting sin, and then the next week, we’re right back where we were. We think we’ve found the answer to our dryness, our hearts are revived— then the next week our souls are shriveled-up again. We keep praying for our loved ones’ salvation and nothing seems to happen.

What we can’t see is, that in all this circling activity God is doing something we can’t know. Our job is to just keep at it until God knocks the walls down. Mostly this walk with Jesus is doing rather ordinary things in extraordinary ways— being faithful. Barnes points out, just paying attention is a synonym for spirituality. If you add up all the recorded events in Jesus’ life, it doesn’t even come close to a year out of three-and-a-half years of recorded ministry. While certainly everything isn’t recorded, it is also safe to assume Jesus had ordinary days. And Barnes speculates, suppose you were given the chance to go back in a time machine and spend a day with Jesus when He was ministering on earth. You were all excited, and Jesus welcomed you. Then He said, “Today is laundry day.” How disappointing— no miracles. But then again, laundry with Jesus— maybe that wouldn’t be too shabby.

There was that day, after all the circling around and around and the seven trips around on the seventh day, at Joshua’s command, the trumpets sounded the signal, a long blast, at which Joshua had commanded everyone to shout and the walls of the city collapsed before them so “every man charged straight in” (20). Only the section of the wall in which Rahab’s house was built was left standing. This may well have been an earthquake miraculously timed like we speculated about the huge block of earth falling into the Jordan from the canyon wall 20 mi. upstream to stop the river earlier for their Israel’s crossing.

CONCLUSION

Do you ever feel like you’re just going through the motions? Of course you do. Do you get discouraged with your spiritual progress, feeling like you are back where you’ve been before yet another time? Are you stuck in a spiritual rut? Do you get discouraged with the lack of progress with others you care about? Is it tough to just keep on showing up? I’m sure we can all answer “yes” to all of the above.

But we don’t really know what’s going on. In God’s time, suddenly there is the answer, the breakthrough and the walls collapse before us. Maybe it’s at church or at a retreat or in a visit with someone. How often when that happens, I’ve thought, “What if I hadn’t shown up? I really, really didn’t feel like coming— and here I almost missed it.”

You may know some people who are like Jericho, “tightly shut up....”(6:1). Keep praying. Keep circling. It is not meaningless. It is at the command of the Lord. We must just be faithful until He

brings the walls down. Then, by all means take the city!