

Sermon #1,017: Joshua 5:13-6:5  
4-7-13 (Easter 1), Bethany-Princeton MN

THE COMMANDER OF THE LORD'S ARMY SAYS "PEACE TO YOU"

Prayer: O risen Christ, who said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed": Mercifully grant that this benediction may be ours; so that, walking by faith and not by sight, we may evermore rejoice in You, and confess You as our Savior, our Lord, and our God. Amen. (*Parish Prayers, 1<sup>st</sup> Sun. After Easter*)

In the name of Jesus, our Captain in the well-fought fight, dear fellow redeemed:

People who consider themselves atheists or agnostics, and other critics of Biblical Christianity, do not only target the resurrection of Jesus for their attacks. The enemies of Christianity chip away at the Christian faith by attacking this and that in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. This brings us to the divinely commanded warfare in the book of Joshua, beginning with the battle of Jericho.

These battles are offensive to some people. They think it proves that our God is evil, or is made up, and faith in Him is a bad thing, because what kind of God would command His people to do all this killing? They say that Christians who object to the Muslim concept of *jihad*, or holy war, in the Koran should just shut up about it, because just look at what Joshua did. A typical statement along these lines is this one that I found: "The book of Joshua describes little more than a genocidal campaign against the unsuspecting inhabitants of Canaan. Their only crime was living in the wrong place at the wrong time." (*www.atheism.about.com*)

Yes, those poor Canaanites who worshipped idols, brutally sacrificed their children to their gods, and promoted lewdness and sexual orgies at their altars.

But the point is not that they deserved better than they got, nor that they did deserve what they got. We don't deserve anything good either. Not caring about someone's soul, not wanting to forgive, and finding it easy to hurt someone with your words or to neglect their needs are equally damning sins. If God would destroy everyone who displeases Him, what hope is there for us?

The way to understand the warfare in Joshua is not through the lens of the Law – what men deserve by their deeds – but only through the Gospel, by seeing Christ. As it happens, that's what takes place here. You see Christ. Joshua sees Christ. Joshua was evidently by himself, scouting Jericho, when **“he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand.”** This is not a mere man, for next He describes Himself as **“Commander of the army of the LORD”** and says the same thing to Joshua that He said to Moses at the burning bush: **“Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.”** He proceeded to say things only God could know, about what would happen to Jericho. Only God could keep such promises.

It's obvious this **“Commander of the LORD's army”** is none other than Christ. But what's interesting here is that He uses military language about Himself, calling Himself “commander” or “captain” of an army. Why does He give His blessing to death and destruction? How can this one who is for war be the same one whose first word to His disciples after His resurrection is **“Peace”**?

The misunderstanding comes from a skewed definition of peace. These days we idealize what peace is and imagine it does not cost anything. In this way of thinking, peace in the home means giving the children everything they want; peace between nations comes from disarming; peace between people happens if you just don't talk about areas of disagreement; and peace in the church comes from papering over doctrinal differences and pretending there is unity.

But that is not what our Lord has in mind when He speaks of peace. When the risen Jesus met His disciples on Easter evening, He had made peace between God and the world; as 2 Corinthians 5 says, **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,”** making peace. But it was anything but peaceful in how it was done. Christ Himself was treated violently and done to death to make this peace.

The darkening of the noonday sun, the ripping of the temple veil, the quaking of the earth all said that this peace cost a great deal. What Jesus did in His death and resurrection is not just one of many Bible stories; it is the story that the Bible tells. What happens in Joshua is a part of that story. You can't judge these battles just by opening to Joshua and reading it in a way that's severed from Jesus' death and resurrection. That's where people go wrong in judging these battles.

What the book of Joshua shows us about war and peace is not primarily about taking over a physical land; it is preparing for the war Jesus waged with death and the devil, how He made peace between man and God. It's teaching about the war between heaven and hell, the old Adam vs. the new man, the need to crucify yourself to the world, and putting on the armor of God.

That's the real war. As St. Paul says, *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but ... against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"* (Ep 6:12). It doesn't mean the devil doesn't use people for his purposes. We have enemies, who do Satan's will and persecute the Gospel. But it's because of their opposition to Christ. *"If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you,"* Jesus said.

Here in Joshua He appears to confuse this issue. When Joshua asks, **"Are you for us, or for our adversaries?"** we expect Him to say He is for Joshua's people, since they are His chosen people, they believe in Him; the Canaanites don't. But He says, **"No."** Is Christ saying He doesn't care about the outcome? Is He saying that one of these is not better than the other, faith doesn't matter? No, not at all. He says right after this, **"See! I have given Jericho into your hand."** But to understand His answer, you must know that from God's perspective, among mankind He has no enemies. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son"* (Jn 3:16). On their side, they might be His enemies; but He can't withdraw His love from them, to Him they're nothing but objects of His love.

He does not take sides when He answers Joshua, because we are not like Him. He never changes. He is steadfast and faithful. Always perfect in His love. Completely unselfish. But see the aftermath of the battle of Jericho, in Joshua 7, when an Israelite named Achan covets condemned goods, steals and lies. The Lord can't be on the side of sin. So the question isn't as Joshua asks it: *Are You for us and not them? Is the Lord on our side?* Instead it's: *Are you on the Lord's side?*

This is the point at which our self-confidence flounders. The Law judges us to be lacking in every way when we stand before the Commander of the Lord's army. You know that although you intend to be, you aren't always on His side, in this sense, in battle language: You don't fight sin and temptation like you should, you get tired of the struggle, you give in. The world and your sinful flesh are hard opponents. You get tired of always having to say no and be the bad guy or the only one who abstains. The temptations the devil presents to you, through friends and dressed up as what's popular, don't seem like things to hate or that will harm you. You lay down your arms. You abandon the battlefield. You retreat. The devil's little victories over you pile up. So if you answer the question from the Law, *Are you on the Lord's side*, then you will conclude that He can't be on your side, that there is no difference between you and the godless heathen, you are no better than them, and then all this fighting seems pointless.

When people judge the warfare in the book of Joshua, basically they are only using the Law to measure it. The Law judges all men guilty. Christ could never choose between two groups. There is no righteous cause on either side.

But the point at which our self-confidence flounders due to the message of the Law is also the point at which **“Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped,”** and called him **“my Lord.”** The purpose of the Law is to show us our sins and how much we need a Savior. This is what Joshua does. He bows before

this “Man” and calls him “my Lord.” He places his faith in the one who looks like a Man, who is true God, and Joshua confesses this faith in Him.

Doesn't he sound like someone we met today? Thomas! -- His moment of repentance is also his confession of faith: *“My Lord and my God!”* He confesses the risen Jesus to be true God and Savior. He confesses faith in the Gospel, in the Jesus who was raised for his justification and stands before Him, not for judgment but to speak peace to Thomas, even to him. Christ is still the Commander of the Lord's army, but his first word to doubting Thomas is “Peace.” His army consists of apostles who abandoned the field like we do, but who conquer far more than Jericho, even the world, by speaking His Word, which the Bible calls a *“weapon for warfare”* that is *“mighty for pulling down strongholds”* (2Co 10:4).

This is how it ended in the battle of Jericho too. How did the walls of Jericho come down, at the end of the seventh day of walking together? The priests blew the trumpets and the people shouted with a great shout. Shouting in the Old Testament, as the psalms repeatedly say, was to *“shout for joy”* – singing, really, as in: *“Sing aloud to God our strength; Make a joyful shout to the God of Jacob”* (Ps 81:1). So the battle was won by a clear trumpet call and by singing in unison, as with one voice shouting for joy to the Lord in faith and hope.

This is the way you fight the battle too. It is a battle to be on the Lord's side, by grace, through faith. It is sometimes a titanic struggle to repent. It is a struggle to believe the Gospel. It is a daily wrestling to put down your old Adam and walk as is fitting for a Christian. It involves pain, sacrifice, and self-denial, and because the devil is opposed to this he will make it difficult for you. The total destruction of the Canaanites shows not only how God always wants His people to keep separate from those who would weaken their faith and loosen their hold on salvation, but how He wants to help us in this struggle.

Above everything else, He has given us the weapons for warfare, His Word and Sacraments, and they are truly mighty for pulling down the devil's strongholds. Confessing and living inside the true doctrines of God's Word we sound a clear trumpet call. We confess our faith in Jesus in such a way that it is a triumphant shout to the Lord filled with faith and hope, not many discordant notes, everyone giving his/her own opinion, but whether spoken, sung, or just quietly lived in our vocations, it is a beautiful song of harmonious notes.

This past week I saw a video portion of an interview that Roman Catholic archbishop Dolan from New York did with one of our national media. They were talking to him about the new pope and other things, but what interested me was what he said in response to the challenge that their church faces, which they also share with our church and Christian churches everywhere: Dolan said that we live in a society of me, myself, and I, where people only think about what they want and think it doesn't affect anyone else, but the church is called to speak about "we," that we are never an "I" but only a "we," always together.

We walk together in faith and love, so that we are not surrounded by the evil city of this world but God is turning it around so that we, who are of the heavenly city, surround the evil city and overwhelm it with the true faith, confession of the true faith, and with true love, love for the enemy, love for every soul, the love that is from heaven, the love of Christ for the world. You are in the Lord's army, and led by our Captain, Jesus Christ, we make war on sin so that true peace is the result, His "*peace which passeth human knowing*" (ELH #347 v. 4). This peace is our everlasting song. Amen!