

The Power in the Pause

Joshua 5: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
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As we take up the events of Joshua 5, what do you make of this for a military strategy? On the eve of an epic battle you 1) wound all your fighting men in a vital place, rendering them helpless, 2) stop for an elaborate ritual meal, and 3) have your commander fall on his face before a stranger with a sword. Does that sound like a war-winning plan?

This was the situation of the people of God. The spring-swollen River Jordan was at their back, and the fortified city of Jericho was before them. The momentum from having crossed that river was on their side. So was the mojo of their reputation from the past. The people had been waiting for years for this opportunity and the men were spoiling for a fight. It was time to seize the day.

So what strategy did the LORD I AM use? First, he commanded that all the warriors be circumcised. Flint knives were to be used, making them unable to fight for at least several days. Second, he commanded them to keep the Passover there in the countryside beyond the Jordan, following all the rituals of the sacred meal. Third, Joshua encountered a strange man with a drawn sword. Rather than challenge him, Joshua bowed before him, the mighty commander powerless before what turned out to be the commander of the LORD's army.

None of this makes any sense as a practical strategy. You crossed the river, so now storm the gates. But God wants his people to *pause*. And in that pause is all the power for the days and years ahead. Let's take a look at each of these three episodes and consider how they apply to us.

1) Circumcision of the warriors. Centuries earlier, the LORD God had called Abraham to be the father of a great nation through which God would bless the whole world. God swore by himself to be faithful to Abraham. He asked Abraham to respond to those promises with a sign, a sign in flesh and blood, and the sign in his own body of being circumcised. God's people would be physically marked as belonging to him. But for some reason, during the wilderness years, the practice had been abandoned. We have no record that the LORD commanded them *not* to circumcise during the desert years. Perhaps the people just disobeyed. Or perhaps they felt like during these forty years they weren't really living anywhere,

they weren't really any people of God. They were being punished for disobedience, and so maybe they just felt the shame so deeply that they would not even take the sign of the covenant. We don't know for sure.

But now as they finally got ready to enter the Promised Land, the LORD wanted the ancient sign to be reinstated. Interrupted by disobedience, the promise of the land flowing with milk and honey would finally be fulfilled. It would be a people of God's own possession who would take the land, and they needed to bear the mark of covenant fidelity. This would also be a vivid reminder that the battle belongs not to the warriors but to the LORD alone. God could wound his warriors and make them vulnerable to attack because God is sovereign and his will *shall* be done. In fact, the wounding was a prelude to the display of his power.

Each month at our leadership meetings, we hear a testimony from one of our elders of what God is doing in his life. Last month, Chuck Barber talked about reading a book called *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. Darin had given the book to all our Lenten small group leaders. (Personally, I've been in too much of a *hurry* to have read it yet!). Chuck began reading through it. At first he thought, "Well, this book is fine, but everyone knows I am not often in a hurry. I don't really have a problem with rushing around too much." He shared these thoughts with his wife Mitzi. She agreed with her husband that Chuck doesn't often go into any swivets of rush. "But..." she said, the way only people have loved each other passionately for three decades can do, "You might have a little issue with 'inflexible agenda syndrome.'"

That struck home. Chuck told us he realized that having a list of the day's tasks he is determined to get done can keep him from being open to the people God sends him, just as much as if he were scurrying around town in a busy frenzy. The point of eliminating hurry is to become more like Jesus. He almost always allowed himself to be interrupted by other people's needs. In fact, that seemed to be Jesus' daily plan. Go out in the streets and see what comes up. The book says that "Hurry is the enemy of love." A determined and inflexible agenda can be just as much a barrier to being open to give the love others need. In each case, what's required is the willingness to pause one's own plans for God's plans.

That's what we're seeing in our passage from Joshua. The LORD ordered an enforced pause for healing. He demanded the people remember their distinctive identity. The warriors would have to postpone using their training and passion while they recalled God's ancient claim on them through this physical sign.

What we find is that God uses us more often for others when the call of God inconveniences our own plan. God calls us to lay down our lives for him, to give him our wills, even as he sends us in service. That process, to put it mildly, causes inconvenience. Sometimes it involves being wounded in a vital place. Having your best laid plans thwarted. Having an employment change. Having all your privileges revoked. Having your skills sidelined. Just when we think we are being made worthless according to our expectations of what we are to be and do, God says, “Now watch me work.” Sliced up warriors would not be much good in a fight, but the battle was not going to be won with their swords anyway. Only the LORD could win this battle and so what mattered most was their belonging to the LORD, their willingness to obey, even to the point of taking that sign.

2) They celebrated the Passover at the proper time. If you’ve ever been in the military during a major holiday, you know how strange it is to be away from all traditions. If you’ve ever had to work on Christmas or spend Thanksgiving in the hospital, you know that holidays just don’t seem the same. Also, in emergencies, it’s easy to hit the pause button in life’s rituals. Look, I just can’t get to church now with the situation at home. We’re just not going to do Christmas this year after all that happened. We might well think that with all the battle preparations going on, the people of God might have skipped Passover that year, or postponed it until after they defeated their enemies.

But Scripture makes a point to tell us that pausing to keep the Passover was crucial. The LORD had just brought them miraculously across the Jordan just like he had brought his people through the Red Sea. They would need him to fight for them as they approached Jericho just as they had needed God to save them from the Egyptians. The Passover meal was a way of keeping faith with the God who had always kept faith with his people. They recalled his mighty acts in such a way that they knew him to be present in the moment and anticipated his faithfulness in the future.

I talked with a guy recently who was aching to know if God truly forgives him for the wrongs he has done. His view of God has always focused on God’s judgement of our sin and his wrath that we should have known better. I did my best to share Scriptures that matter. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” The father of the prodigal son watched down the road everyday for his son’s return. When at last he came, the father ran to welcome him. He embraced his raggedy boy with full hearted love. But then I added, “Now I can tell you these things, and pray that the Spirit causes

you to believe them and have hope. But I have to tell you that even if you can hear these words, they will slip away unless you *rehearse* them. We have to thread the truth of God's grace and forgiveness through our lives by repetition. And the chief way God chose for us to rehearse the story of his redemption is Sunday worship." That's what we do: we sing the story and let ourselves be taken up into it. Jesus gave us Communion, the Lord's Supper, precisely during a Passover meal. Communion is meant to be the rehearsing of the story of Christ who died, Christ who is risen and Christ who will come again. We seal our place in the story as we share the bread and drink from the cup. It's the Pause in which we re-collect the truth about God before we engage the battle of the coming week.

3) Joshua met the commander of the LORD's army. Joshua 5 concludes with an intriguing, mysterious episode where Joshua encounters a man standing before him. The man had a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua knew this man was not one of his own. He seemed to know this was more than a man. Joshua did not raise his sword to fight nor did he turn to flee. He asked, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" What side are you on? The man answered, "No! But I am a commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." I am not on a side as you conceive of sides. I command the army of the Sovereign God whose will shall be done. What God has promised, he will do. It's way bigger, way deeper than the way you draw up the lines. Joshua understood. He did not insist on being the master. Joshua fell to his face and worshipped the LORD.

It's easy for me to feel discouraged about where our culture is heading. The elevation of the self—my desires, my identity—leads to bizarre, even chilling outcomes. That discouragement makes it easy for me to see everything in terms of good guys and bad guys. I want *those* people to fail and fall. I want *these* people to rise and win. I can get baited into looking at everything through a simplifying, polarizing lens offered to me by a particular side. Then I make the mistake of thinking that over-simplified, vilifying view is God's view. Surely God is on my side in the issues I care about.

Joshua asked the commander of the LORD, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" As if that were the only choice. As if everything could be so reduced. Wait a minute, Joshua. Before you jump into this fight thinking you know exactly what outcomes the LORD wants, take a pause. The angel answered in effect, "I am enacting the deeper, higher, greater justice of God. Many of the lines of God's justice come together beyond your sight." To take just a quick example, the nation's eyes have been directed to the spectacle of the January 6th commission. We may well have strong feelings about this inquisition. We may ask, "Was Jan. 6

a nefarious insurrection? Was it a legitimate protest that went awry? Whose side are you on God?" We'd be getting close to our Joshua passage if the word came, "January 6 is the date that marks Epiphany! For 20 centuries my people have recalled the star that shined over the infant Jesus. You have celebrated that I called Gentile outsiders to kneel before the world's savior. That's the January 6 that matters. How are you shining a light over Christ that draws the nations to my mighty redemption?" We're too often in a lather about the wrong contests. God is ultimately on the side of restoring the human race. He wants us to view everyone, even our enemies through the lens of the cross. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. While we were yet God's enemies, he sent his Son to die for us. Christ sends his church to seek and to save the lost in his name. To come alongside the wandering and gather them home. To deal kindly even with our opponents. To wash wounds even of those who mean us harm. Not to condone evil actions. But also not to condemn lost, wayward souls in their blindness. Not to confuse what Biblical justice is with lies. But also not to write people off instead of loving them.

Joshua 5 seems like bizarre military strategy. But God means us to see that the victory belongs to him alone. We enter covenant with him, even though it's a wounding and a dying to self. We adjust our lives to God's rhythm through his church. We look not first to culture and its baiting of us to hate each other, but to the commander who is the LORD and follow his call into Christ's mission. Then we will see next week how seemingly impenetrable walls come tumbling down.