

Renewing the Covenant  
Joshua 8:30-35

The sudden change almost gives you whiplash. Up to this point in the story, the people of Israel have been involved in all sorts of military maneuvers. In chapter 6, they had destroyed the city of Jericho, after God brought its walls a-tumblin' down. After an initial defeat at Ai in chapter 7, a tremendous victory followed in chapter 8, capped off by the execution of the king of the city, rather graphically recounted in the verse immediately preceding today's passage.

But then in verse 30, it's as if we've switched the channel from a Rambo movie to a Billy Graham Crusade, for we suddenly find ourselves in the middle of a worship service. No, not the sort of thing we might expect, with the victorious soldiers having a brief devotional in their camp, giving thanks to God before heading off to the next battle. No, all of the people – men, women, and children – picked up stakes and traveled some 20 miles north, behind enemy lines, into territory that they had not yet conquered. Oh, and then they divided themselves into two groups, standing on the slopes of two mountains with a valley in between them – not really the most defensible position, especially when you consider that all their leaders were concentrated in the lowest, most vulnerable spot. So, what's wrong with Joshua and his lieutenants? Were they somehow trying to lose this war?

No, they were just trying to be obedient to God. They went to all the trouble and danger of having this worship service because they were convinced God wanted them to do it. They were thus setting before us a clear example of what true faith involves – for as we've seen throughout this book, trusting God means following His lead and doing what He says.

But God doesn't always communicate with people in the same way. After all, up to this point in the story, God had been speaking to Joshua directly, the way you and I might talk to one another. For example, God told Joshua to wait by the flood-swollen Jordan River for three days before God dried up the waters so Joshua could lead the people across. God then told Joshua in great detail how the people were to walk around and around the city of Jericho before God destroyed its walls. God told Joshua why the people experienced defeat at Ai, and then God gave Joshua specific instructions on how to conquer that stubborn city.

And when we read about the intimate, direct way God spoke to Joshua, it's easy for us to become more than a little bit envious. I mean, wouldn't you like for God to whisper in your ear every time you have a difficult decision to make? Wouldn't it be nice to have absolutely no doubt that you were doing exactly what God wanted you to do?

Of course, I suppose that would depend at least in part on what God was telling you, right? Back in chapter 5, God told Joshua to circumcise all the warriors in his army – but only after they had crossed the Jordan River, and thus after they had made themselves supremely vulnerable to their enemies. Now, there was no mistaking God's clear directions, but that sure didn't make things any easier or safer for God's people on that occasion.

Okay, so how did God communicate with His people in today's passage? How did they get the crazy idea to put their military campaign on hold and go have a worship service behind enemy lines? Well, this time, God didn't speak directly to Joshua. Instead, in verses 31, 33, 34, and 35 we learn that the people of Israel were carrying out instructions God gave to Moses sometime in the past. In other

words, they were following the Word of God as it had been recorded for them, even though such obedience didn't really make either tactical or strategic sense, and even though such obedience was more than a little dangerous. Oh, and just to make sure everyone knew they had such reverence for the Scriptures, they whitewashed some big rocks and wrote down every single word of the Law of Moses on them as part of their worship service. There was no question about where their loyalties lay.

And isn't that how we Presbyterians like to see ourselves? We claim to be people of the Book. Our worship spaces put our pulpits front and center, and we give the lion's share of time in our worship services to hearing the Word of God read and proclaimed. Our Confession of Faith claims the Scriptures to be inspired, breathed out by God and thus the rule of our faith and life. We believe that the Bible speaks authoritatively, so that we are bound to believe and obey it. We accept it as true because it is the Word of God.

Yes, we say all that, but do we live like we really believe it? For what do we do when the Bible tells us things that just seem to be impossible? I mean, do any of us really love God exclusively with all we are and all we have? Do we really love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves? That's the Great Commandment we find in the Old and New Testaments, and that's what Jesus Himself told us to do. Are we really doing what the Scripture teaches us?

And what do we do when the Scripture tells us to do dangerous things? After all, loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us and praying for those who persecute us sounds like an invitation to more abuse, doesn't it? Doesn't it make more sense for us to hedge our bets, to put ourselves first in our relationships, to give God and other people just the leftovers of our time and attention and devotion?

Well, that's not what happened in this passage, is it? No, when they were faced with what had to seem like a pointless and dangerous task, instead of trying to make excuses, instead of trying to deny what God's Word plainly said, instead of appealing to all sorts of sound tactical and strategic reasons to try to weasel out of their obligations, God's people just did what God had told Moses they should do in Deuteronomy 27, which we read responsively this morning. God had told His people that, after they had crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they were to go to Mount Ebal, build an altar of uncut stones, and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to God. They were also to write all the words of God's Law in a public place, where everyone could read it. And that's exactly what Joshua and the rest of the people of Israel did, regardless of the difficulty and personal risk involved to themselves. And that's the same way we are called to submit ourselves to the authority of the Word of God, no matter what it says.

But there's another reason they went all the way to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to have their worship service. For in doing so, they were not only demonstrating their obedience to the Word of God. They were also placing their trust in the covenant promises of God. Now, to understand these promises, we have to go all the way back in the Scriptures to the time when God first made those promises, all the way back to the Genesis chapter 12, which records how God first called Abraham to leave the place where he was living in Haran and make his own journey into Canaan. And what did Abraham do when he came into the Promised Land? He "passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem" – that's the same place Joshua and the people worshipped, for Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim are just outside Shechem. And what did God say to Abraham there? "To your descendants I will

give this land.” And how did Abraham respond to God’s promise? “He built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.”

In other words, when Joshua and the people came to this particular place to worship, they were not only remembering what God had promised Abraham so many hundreds of years before. They were celebrating how God had kept His promises. God had promised to make Abraham a great nation, and here they were. God had promised to give this very land to Abraham’s descendants, and now they were standing on the very same spot, claiming that promise for themselves. They were worshipping the same God on the same kind of altar in the same place, thus sharing Abraham’s faith in the most direct way possible.

And don’t we do the same thing whenever we gather for worship? Don’t we remember how God has kept all the promises He made to Abraham through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ? Don’t we celebrate how God has made a great nation from all those who share the faith of Abraham, all those who trust in Christ as our Savior? Don’t we remember how, by Christ’s suffering and death, God has freed us from bondage to sin? Don’t we rejoice in the new life Christ has given us by His own resurrection? Yes, whenever we obey God by worshipping Him, focusing our hearts and minds on His glory, we can’t help but remember His faithfulness in keeping all His promises to us.

But our obedience to God’s commands and our celebration of God’s faithfulness doesn’t mean all our struggles are over. No, even after we’ve been saved, we still have to have the same kind of faith that Abraham had, a faith that trusts God for blessings yet to come. After all, at the time Abraham had worshipped at Shechem, Genesis chapter 12 verse 6 makes it plain that the Canaanites were still living in the land. And Joshua’s people faced the same threat, the same kind of opposition. And the following chapters go on to explain how the people of God had to continue fighting against those people, continuing to trust God to make good on the promises He had made to Abraham so many years before.

In the same way, all of us are called to carry on the struggle against sin wherever we may find it, even inside ourselves, in our own thoughts and feelings. And Joshua’s people had to do the same thing in today’s passage. For what did Deuteronomy 27 tell them to do? They weren’t just supposed to write all the words of God’s Law down on some whitewashed rocks. They weren’t even just told to listen to God’s Word being read. No, they were to affirm that they were God’s people by taking on themselves both the blessings and the curses of the Law, the blessings that come from obedience and the curses that come from turning our backs on God. All the people were to affirm the covenant that God had made with them by giving verbal assent to all the words of God’s Law.

And Deuteronomy 27 gives us an indication of how this was done. By coming as a great nation to Shechem they were claiming the blessings of God’s covenant. The Levites standing down in the valley were then to read one of the curses with a loud voice: “Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image and sets it up in secret.” And all the people were to say, “Amen.”

“Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.” Amen. “Cursed is he who misleads a blind person.” Amen. “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan and widow.” Amen. “Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret.” Amen. And the Levites went on and on, even listing all kinds of sexual sin that the people were to avoid. And after every public or secret sin was recounted, the people were to say “Amen,” which means “That’s the truth,” or “Let it be so.” And the concluding

statement was as comprehensive as possible, pledging the people to complete obedience to God: "Cursed is he who does not confirm all the words of this law by doing them." Amen.

Whether the sins were public or private, whether the sins lay in the heart or were expressed in wicked actions, whether they were abusive or consensual, all the people made a solemn commitment to put all sin away from themselves. For they understood that being the people of God, and thus receiving God's blessings of victory and safety and prosperity necessarily involves living according to God's commands.

It all fits together, doesn't it? And it's all a part of worship. For in worship, we read and obey God's Word to understand how God is calling us to worship Him in thought, word, and deed. In worship, we remember and rely on the covenant promises God has kept through the sacrifice of Christ. But worship isn't just for Sunday mornings. For in worship we also solemnly commit ourselves to be God's people all week long, not just knowing what God's Word says, but making every effort to put it into practice every day, regardless of how stupid or dangerous or pointless our obedience may seem to the unbelieving world.

So in today's passage, God's people really weren't changing the channel at all – they weren't engaging in some sort of sideline activity, they weren't somehow interrupting the flow of real life. No, they understood that their worship was an intimate part of real life, an absolute prerequisite for all their victories. They understood that worship is the foundation of life, that worship is the fuel of life, that worship is the reason for life, that worship is the way we express and experience our covenant relationship with the God Who created us for His glory, the God Whose promises never fail, the God Who at the same time calls us to exclusive love for Him and loyalty to Him.

That's why they went to all the trouble to travel up to Shechem to worship God, to hear His Word, to remember His promises, and to pledge their allegiance to Him. Is that why we're here? Is that the kind of relationship we have with God? Is that how we want to live our lives?