

Joshua Renews the Covenant || Joshua 24:1-15
Rev. Drew Hanson || October 14, 2018

Introduction - Baseball

I have to tell you, I love that Cassie and I moved to Boston the year the Red Sox win 108 games and are in the American League Championship Series. I know the game was rough last night, but it's a long series! I used to be a big baseball fan. I played until my freshman year of high school, when I was growing up in San Diego, and especially during those formative years of a young fan's life, the San Diego Padres were pretty good. Don't laugh! They won the division a couple times, even made it to the World Series, only to get swept by the Yankees. But it's about as good as the Padres ever did. The story of professional baseball in San Diego is a little different than in Boston. First, the Red Sox had won five championships and were about 40 years into the Curse of the Great Bambino before the Padres even existed. Now, I know it was tough during those Curse years, but it broke in 2004 and the Red Sox have won three world series in the last 14 years. That's pretty good. The story of professional baseball is so much more intriguing here in Boston than in San Diego.

This morning, we are talking about the story of the Israelites finally entering the land God had promised to Abraham's descendents centuries before. After slavery and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, God finally gives Israel the Promised Land. His command for them is to never forget that it was God who did all this for them. It was not Israel who saved themselves

from Egypt, it was not Israel who planted the fields and vineyard or built the buildings and cities that they would now occupy. It's a humbling passage. Israel, you didn't do this. Don't forget that.

Now let me get a little silly before I get serious on you. For a baseball fan, going from being a Padres fan to being a Red Sox fan is like entering the Promised Land. It is absolutely foreign to me to live in a place where the baseball team is both expected to do well and actually does well. Now, I believe that God brought me to Quincy to be the pastor here. So I would imagine that if God were to give me a similar speech from a baseball fan perspective, it would be like this: Drew I am bringing you into the land of Red Sox baseball, you were not there when they won all those championships in the early 1900s, you were not there to root on greats from Ted Williams to Pedro Martinez, you were not there during the Curse, and you were not there during the recent championships. You just moved here, you didn't do any of this! Fair enough, God.

Background - the Covenant

In Genesis 12, we saw God make a covenant with Abraham. Part of that covenant was the promise of land in Canaan. "To your offspring, I will give this land," God tells Abraham. We see the promise again and again in Genesis: Genesis 17:8; Genesis 28:4; Genesis 28:13; Genesis 35:6. The promise of land is so strong in Genesis that Abraham even address God in this way in Genesis 24:7: "The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my

father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,'”

The promise is important. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all nomads, they had no land. Then Joseph led them down to Egypt, and Egypt gave them some land at first, but it wasn't really theirs. And when they filled that land, a new Pharaoh came and enslaved them, ripping any land away from them. Then Moses saves them and they wander again as a landless people. During the 40 years of wandering after the exodus, the promise of land is repeated again and again. It is repeated throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. After the Ten Commandments, the rest of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are filled with laws and records as Israel is wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. When Deuteronomy begins, the wandering has been going on for 39 years and 11 months. That means that in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are at the cusp of the Promised Land. They only had one month left of wandering before the land promised to them. Moses gives the Israelites God's final instructions before entering the Promised Land. The land promised to Abraham hundreds of years before was finally in front of them.

Deuteronomy 6

And this is where the tone shifts a little bit. God still promises the land, but he reminds Israel whose land it is ultimately. Some of the most famous words in Scripture is what's called the Shema in Hebrew. It says this, this is the famous part: “Hear, O Israel: The

Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

That’s the famous part, that’s the part that is memorized and still recited regularly in synagogues. But after that famous part, it says this: “When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

The central message the first part is to worship God. To love God. Teach your kids to love God and obey God, write God’s commandments in places like your hand and the doorframe because you’ll see them allll the time.

The second part, though, has a different central message. The message is to not forget God. The temptation for ISrael is going to be that they enter the land of Canaan, and everything is already set up for them to be a nation, and eventually the temptation will

be that they think *they* did all this. God is telling Israel that when life starts finally getting good, don't forget me. How sad is that God tells us to love him and in almost the same breath he also has to tell us not to forget him.

In Promised Land

Now all this is said before Israel enters the Promised Land, before the conquest, before being there. The story we read today warns against the same temptation as that second part of Deuteronomy 6. It's easy to forget God when things are easy. It's easy to think it was all you when you're successful. God says don't forget me.

Let's look at Joshua 24 again, and I'm going to give you a little English quiz. God retells the story of Israel after the Israelites take the Promised Land. Here's the quiz. Don't worry, it's an easy quiz. One question: who is the subject of each line I'm about to read?

This is what God says to the Israelites as soon as the conquest of Canaan is over: "Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your

ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet[b] ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.

Who was the subject? God. God also mentions a few others, including the Israelites, but whenever anything positive or constructive or salvific happened, it was God who was the subject. *I did this, I did that*, God says. Because here's the temptation. The Israelites are going to want to say that Moses saved them from Egypt and Joshua led them into the Promised Land and Israel made itself a mighty nation. But God tells the story from God's perspective, it is the Lord who made it happen.

Your Story, Out Story

That is how God retells the story of Israel. Think about your story. Who is the subject? Who is the subject when you landed that job or got that promotion, or when you had a child or grandchild, or when you led positive change or succeeded. Even when God works deep in the background of our lives, God is the subject. Now, this is not ever to say that you did not play a part in your successes. I know you worked hard, you studied hard, you loved well. Of course you have a part to play. But when we tell our story as “I worked hard to get this job,” I wonder if God would tell the same story as “I gave her that work ethic,” or “I placed him in the right situation.”

What about the story of this church? Who is the subject? Is it one of its former pastors? Is it a family or couple or elder or staff member? It's God. It was always God, it always is God, and it always will be God. Without God, this church will fail. If I preach without God my sermons will fail. It is God who gave us the Word, it is God who gave me the words to write and speak, and it is God's Holy Spirit who even right now is translating my poor excuse for public speaking into your hearts as a sermon. It is God who speaks through Scripture. It is God who speaks through my stumblings as a preacher. It is God who speaks to each of our hearts right now.

Remember the baseball speech I imagine God gave me? I think

what God would actually say is Drew I'm bringing you to First Presbyterian Church, whose foundations you did not build, whose congregation you did not grow or nurture, whose successes are not yours. Don't forget that I am God, don't forget to serve me in this place.

In Joshua 24, it's like God just pounds this into their minds. God, God, God. The Lord, the Lord, the Lord. Now, once we begin to get it, God says this through Joshua: "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." The Israelites were surrounded by gods they used to have the temptation to worship, and now there are new gods they'll be tempted to worship. In your life, I don't know which gods you're tempted to serve. Money, popularity, power, self-image, addiction, success, comfort. The command is the same today as it was then, serve only God.

Conclusion

Now back to the end of our passage. It changes a bit, and it seems that this is Joshua speaking, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." That is such a good line. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. How great is that line by itself. But how much richer is that line when we are told how much God has done for Israel. How much more

meaningful is it for me and you when *we* say that we will serve the Lord in response to knowing how much God has done for each of us. In saying this, Joshua continued the covenant God made with Israel. Our end of the covenant is serving God. There is nothing we can give God in this covenant that equals what God has given us. But that doesn't mean we can't do anything, as individuals and as a church. As for us and this church, we will serve the Lord.