



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

August 22, 2021
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 and John 6:56-69
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Two Joshuas

Moses' direct successor, Joshua, was not the one to lead his people out of Egypt, but after Moses' death, the leader of the Israelites' task was to complete the journey to the land that was promised them, and to secure a home in that land once they arrived. It is a wondrous account. Upon reaching the boundary of the promised land, Joshua, the warrior-prophet, uses the ark of the covenant to part the River Jordan, akin to the parting of the Red Sea by Moses. Battles with an alliance of Amorite kings ensue, and with more of God's spectacular help (earthquakes, hailstones, and stopping the sun in the sky) they defeat the people of the city of Jericho, and several other cities. In the end, they are victorious, but not before a good seven years of battle. There was a significant time of stability and blessing, but as Joshua's life was coming to its natural conclusion, he felt there was one final act to perform. He called a great assembly of Israel to Shechem, a kind of natural amphitheatre framed by Mounts Gerazim and Ebal, and the very place where Abraham had first camped when he entered Canaan long before then, the place where God appeared to him and confirmed the promise. The first altar he built had been there. Being on the watershed, ancient Shechem had streams issuing from a number of springs, spreading greenery and fertility in every direction. It's at Shechem where Joshua leads all the twelve tribes and their leaders in a rededication to God, the one who led them out of slavery in Egypt, out of idolatry, protected them, and drove away their enemies. The ceremony culminates with Joshua proclaiming: "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." And in kind, every tribe, leader, and household speaks with one voice, "we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." It came to pass after this great ceremony, unifying his people in a common purpose in their new land, that Joshua died, being a hundred and ten years old, his life's work completed and, for now, secured.

When you remember that Jesus of Nazareth was essentially named after this Joshua of old, you can see how Jesus' name alone was a sign of hope. Not only does the name mean "God saves," but the name evokes an extraordinarily powerful period of his people's history, the time when they were winning, when God was literally in their camp, when they spoke with one voice in dedication, when the promised land was theirs. The time of Jesus' life was especially bitter in comparison to the end of the first Joshua's life. They were occupied by Rome, a people balkanized in response to that domination, no clear leader (Jesus once said they were like sheep without a shepherd). On the surface, given their occupation and exploitation, it was a time when it would be fair to suggest that God was indeed not on their side.

And so it is difficult to overestimate the excitement that Joshua's namesake from Nazareth would have stirred up as his ministry continued to bear fruit and grow, even for great multitudes. Behind every visit and sermon and healing would have been an overwhelming hope that this was the time when things would get back to the way

that they should be. Like Joshua of old, this Joshua, many would have thought, was just the one to unite them, to lead them, and to reclaim their land from their enemies.

In fact, there is an earlier scene in John's Gospel where it is written that one of the crowds tried to make him a king by force, to install him as their warrior-prophet Joshua for a time of ruin. Jesus succeeded in escaping them, his kingship was far different than the one for which they longed. And he was only just starting to show them what that was about. And there was a very real chance that even his closest friends and disciples would not be able to understand.

It is in this morning's lection from John where we are transported back to a sermon at the synagogue in Capernaum that redirects all of this passionate longing for a political savior into a bold and disruptive teaching. He doesn't speak of himself as the new Moses, he doesn't speak of himself as the new Joshua. But he does identify with a certain part of that sacred history, but it isn't a person, something far more striking. He speaks of himself as the manna that comes down from heaven, the food that allowed the Hebrews to survive their sojourn in the wilderness. Yes, a gift from God that came from heaven, but this is not a gift of strength and military victory, an avenging angel or an earthquake. Manna is a gift of God that comes in the night, with the dew, in a time of destitution and starvation. Yes, they are now free from slavery, but remember they have years to go before they make it to the land of milk and honey. Unless then, God gives them what they need to scrape by, the daily bread that delivered them from death by exposure. Jesus preaches, if you think of me, think of me like that, as manna from heaven, the bread of life, like manna, except this bread will not only allow you to live for a day, but for eternity.

And then he takes the imagery into vivid territory, using imagery that I expect that we are now comfortable with after centuries of familiarity, but at the time it would have been shocking: Just as you eat manna, you must eat me as well. "He that eateth me, even he shall live by me." "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him." This imagery was so shocking that his disciples, all of them, rebuked it as a "hard saying" as offensive. And they were right, for we see that after this particular teaching, many of his disciples left him, never to return. This is part of a pattern. Unlike the first Joshua who had the preternatural gift of uniting his people, it seems that this Joshua's preaching could be styled as incendiary and divisive, provoking anger, disgust, and even the desire to kill him, a desire that, after several false starts, would indeed be consummated.

This Joshua of Nazareth would not live to a ripe old age, he would not have any military victories, and on the surface, the trajectory of his life was one of spectacular derision and the very image of failure and defeat, at least that is what they tried to make him to be. This looks nothing like the achievement of the first Joshua. But somehow, as the world reacted violently to this second Joshua, as they devoured him, the grace of God shined out of that public disgrace, at every station of his Passion we witnessed how his life and spirit is able to be a source of truth and life for us, our daily and eternal bread. As he was digested by the propaganda machine and the Roman engine of death, his presence, and spirit, and wisdom was revealed, a great process of revelation began that continued through the Resurrection and beyond to our time, where in our Lord Christ we are shown the kind of life that lasts, the kind of life that the worst of this world, even death itself, cannot destroy, Eternal Life.

If we want to have any chance of receiving the gift that Jesus wishes to give us, the "mystery of the gospel" as Paul calls it, the manna from heaven, as Christ calls himself, which is his complete life offered up to those of us on earth, if we are to know him as our bread, we must expect the bread to be broken, if we wish to receive the heart of Christ, we, too, must expect that heart to be broken. Unlike Joshua, Jesus does not promise triumph on the surface, but he does offer something like a triumph, except one that is hidden from our eyes. If Jesus saves, Jesus doesn't save us from broken bodies and broken hearts, he saves us from broken spirits. For his was a spirit that was unbroken by the worst of this world. And his promise to be with us, come what may, until the end of this age, and beyond, remains unbroken. As he said to his disciples, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing, the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." His words abide, his spirit abides, his love abides, ever present for us to take as our daily, and eternal, bread.