

“JOSHUA AND THE GENERAL.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Joshua 5:13-15; 6:1-5

Prayer: Holy Father, may your true and holy Word be faithfully preached and fruitfully applied for your glory and our good, for the sake of Jesus and by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Introduction.

The Christmas season is a time of the year when Hollywood likes to release some blockbuster movies. “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker” comes out December 20. It’s being touted as one of the most eagerly-anticipated movies in history. The anticipation is being stirred up by a string of commercials and movie trailers. Teasers, appetizers, glimpses.

One of the most anticipated events in all of human history was the coming of the Messiah. In anticipation of that event there were numerous predictions, prophecies, and cameo appearances, glimpses of the Christ, glimpses of His presence and power, character and nature. We learned last week these are referred to as theophanies.

A theophany is a manifestation or appearance of God in some visible form. It can be like a pillar of cloud or fire, a burning bush, or thunder and lightning, some display of God’s great power and glory. But more specifically it can take the form of a human being, a temporary, visible, audible appearance of the Son of God.

The theme for our advent series this year is, “When Heaven and Earth Meet: The Theophanies of Jesus in the OT.” We are looking at four appearances of Jesus that foreshadow His incarnation.

All the many and varied OT manifestations were to prepare God’s people for a greater coming. They create a longing for that day when in the fullness of time He would come once and for all.

And for us we they should also stir a longing for His appearing again, for His second coming, the nature of which will be the subject of this evening’s sermon.

Let’s consider this strange and mysterious encounter between Joshua and a general.

Joshua and Jericho.

The time is 40 years after exodus, Moses is dead, Joshua is new leader. Just as Moses led the people across the Red Sea on dry ground, Joshua has led the people of Israel across the Jordan River on dry ground into the Promised Land.

Now Joshua is standing before Jericho. Joshua 6:1 is meant to tell us how humanly impossible this conquest is. The gates were locked, barred and barricaded. It was sealed up tight as a drum. The walls were over 5 feet thick and fifteen feet high. They knew Israel was coming for a long time. There was no element of surprise here. They had plenty of time to lay up provisions, food and water. They were well prepared.

Joshua is out alone doing some recon, spying out Jericho. If he is any kind of military leader, he is looking for strategic and tactical advantages, where are the weaknesses and vulnerabilities. He must feel the heavy burden and weight of responsibility and leadership. The impossibility of launching an attack against such a seriously fortified city must be moving in on him.

Is Joshua like us? Sure, we have seen mighty miracles of God, we have seen incredible blessings and help and grace. Those past forty years leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, those months at the holy mountain, the manna, the water from the rock, the clothes and sandals that never wore out. Sure, God has been good to us, but what about now? What about this fortified city, what about a ragtag people living in tents, what about now? Yeah, but. Yeah, you have been faithful in the past, but we have never faced a problem like this before, what about now?

How quickly does our faith melt in the face of our fears, our anxieties, our doubts? I wonder if Joshua was remembering the words of Moses in one of his last sermons to the people of Israel back in Deuteronomy 9:

Deuteronomy 9:1-2 Hear, Israel: You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you, with large cities that have walls up to the sky. 2 The people are strong and tall—Anakites! You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?”

Yeah, but Moses is dead. Great words, but had he actually seen the thickness and height of those walls? This is a seriously fortified city. Israel is not a military nation.

Joshua and General (the other Joshua).

Suddenly out of nowhere Joshua sees a man standing before him with a drawn sword, a warrior, in an aggressive and threatening posture.

Joshua asks him are you friend or foe, are you for us or against us?

“No, I am commander of the armies of the Lord. Now I have come.”

That’s a strange answer, what does that mean? Wouldn’t you assume as Joshua he is either friend or foe? What third option could there be?

Most of us go through life thinking of us versus them, us versus whatever trial or problem or battle we are up against. And our goal is to try to get God to be on our side, to help us.

We traipse through life with God in our hip pocket, thinking God is our co-pilot. We have our agendas, our dreams, our plans. What happens when we find out Jesus' agenda is completely different from ours?

Imagine Joshua saying, "Wow, how cool is this, I am so glad you are here, thanks for coming, so here is the plan I have for Jericho, let's do this."

"Sorry, Joshua, but you don't understand, you are thinking too small, you are thinking like a man, my thoughts and my ways are way beyond yours. I am not here to fight for you, and I am not here to fight for them. You can't box me in like that or define me according to your worldly categories. My allegiance is to no man, to no nation, to no side. The question is will you fit into my purpose, my plan?"

Remember last week God came to Jacob to pick a fight, to do battle with him, to humble him and give him a limp. This time ***God is coming to pick a fight*** with the wicked inhabitants of Canaan and to take their land. This is not Israel's quarrel, but God's. The sins of the people of the land are against God, and Israel is just God's instrument for purging and purifying the land.

Who is this man? Is he a human or a heavenly angel or is he the divine person of Jesus in another pre-incarnation appearance?

Some have said it is an archangel like Michael, including many Jewish scholars, but I don't see how that's possible. When Joshua falls down to worship him, he doesn't stop him. An angel would never receive worship since they are created beings who worship God. When the apostle John tried to worship an angel in Revelation, the angel immediately stopped him.

Revelation 19:10 At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!"

Second, the man identifies himself. He is neither an Israelite or a Canaanite. He is the commander of the Lord's armies, the Captain of the heavenly host of angels. In Joshua 6:2 it's the Lord who spoke to Joshua.

Third, the man says the ground is holy, take off your sandals. Angels, even archangels, don't make the ground holy. The angels declare God to be "Holy, holy, holy!" And Joshua obeyed.

This event at the beginning of Joshua's leadership is meant to remind us of a similar event at the beginning of Moses' leadership when he experienced a theophany in a burning bush and the Lord told him the ground is holy, take off your sandals.

The final evidence that Joshua knows this is God he is dealing with is seen and heard in his response, when he worships and submits, and asks:

“What does my lord say to his servant?”

Joshua is acknowledging this person has a power and authority that belong to God alone. Worship and submission are our only two responses in the presence of God.

When is the last time you have said that in prayer? Have you ever said that? When you pray the Lord’s Prayer do you slow down and pause as you say, “Thy will be done.” Are we participating in what He is doing if we never ask what His will is and what He wants of us?

When I ask the question at baptism, “Do you accept God’s will for your child’s life, whatever that will might be?” do you really accept that? Do you accept that for yourself?

Do you tremble at the thought of being in the presence of a holy God? Do you ever consider that He doesn’t exist for us, but we exist for Him? We don’t live that way, do we? If we ask anything of God, it is for Him to help us and bless our will, our plans. When do we submit and yield, and ask Him His plans?

I was waiting to make a right turn the other day behind the car in front of me, and he was letting all the cars coming from the other direction go first and I was getting annoyed. Why wasn’t it at least every other one, but he just sat there letting everyone else cut in. It wasn’t until he pulled out that I look up and saw the yield sign in our lane. We were supposed to yield to the oncoming traffic, but I was annoyed, I didn’t like yielding, I want to go ahead. Yielding is hard.

Do we recognize who is standing before us, who is present here with us, do we recognize His presence, His supreme worth, importance? Who is this who has stepped into our world, our history, our life? What is our will compared to His will?

Do we respond to His presence like the Canaanites and double down in our own will or like Rahab the prostitute, the only one in all of Canaan who submitted and surrendered?

The text reminds us God is not present to fight our battles or help in our causes or jump to our rescue when we get in trouble as though He were a genie in a bottle. The world belongs to God, history is His, the battle is His, salvation belongs to the Lord. We are here to serve Him, to do His will, to follow Him and depend on Him completely.

Remember the old song “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho.” The truth is Joshua did neither, there was no battle and Joshua didn’t fight it. The Lord did it.

Jesus and the incarnation.

This theophany anticipates the incarnation when Jesus appears as the warrior God armed for battle, sword drawn, at the head of the armies of the Lord, ready to crush the serpent's head. He came to do battle with Satan and sin and death.

Matthew 10:34 Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Colossians 2:15 Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

He has come among us and is with us. Not always for us, sometimes against us to discipline and correct. But He is here with us, just as surely as He was with the disciples.

He comes with the two-edged sword to fight our enemies and to fight our sins, to kill death and to kill our unbelief and lack of faith. His sword is the Word of God, His Gospel of truth and life.

He has come to bring down our Jericho walls of pride, lust, greed, envy, anger, unforgiveness.

For those who love Jesus the sword is wielded in love, even as it cuts and does surgery in our souls. For those who resist and rebel against Jesus the sword is terrible, the sword of judgment.

Implications and application.

This is a clear demonstration of God's presence, He is with us, and His power, that He is at work among us. Yes, He does fight for us, but more importantly He fights for Himself, for His glory and for the accomplishing of His will and His salvation. The battle belongs to the Lord and the glory belongs to the Lord.

The incarnation of Jesus is the profound kindness and goodness of our God who demonstrates in the most tangible way possible that He has come, and He is with us, and He is fighting the greatest enemies of our souls.

The Canaanites trusted in walls and gates and stored up provisions, in their own resources and resourcefulness. The Israelites trusted in God and obeyed Him even when His commands seemed utterly foolish on the surface, and certainly give one pause to question God's credibility.

The Israelites had to abandon all human wisdom and reason in order to follow God. The foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of man.

As unconventional as this plan of attack was, it is no more unconventional than God's way of salvation, which was a stumbling block to the Jews and utter folly to the Greeks. A crucified

Messiah on a Roman cross, rising from the dead and forgiving sinners. A first century Jewish rabbi being the only way to God. You can't make that kind of stuff up.

What is crazier, that or walking around a city seven times and the walls falling down?

This life is not by might or by strength, but by the Spirit of the Lord.
God's ways are not our ways, God's methods are not our methods.
God's ways always require faith and obedience.

Like when God says you will do better living on 90% of your income than on 100% of your income, and you will do better when you give Him one day out of seven rather than keeping all seven for yourself and your desires and purposes. And like when God says you will do better in life when you keep sex confined only to marriage between one man and one woman. And like when God says it will go better in marriage when the husband is the spiritual head and leader and the wife submits as the suitable partner and support. And like when God says I created them male and female, and it will go better when we accept and submit to our assigned gender and embrace it as good. Like when God says it will go better when you forgive one another and not harbor resentment or bitterness or anger or revenge or hate.

Advent is God breaking into our world, interrupting our lives, to bring His agenda. And if we yield to it, we will discover it is far better than ours. Like when God says:

Proverbs 3:5-10 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.
7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.
8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.
9 Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;
10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

May he who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, that the outcome of the battle between you and Satan has never been uncertain. You have crushed the serpent's head, and we deal with a defeated foe. Heal our wounds, refresh us today for our battle with sin and evil, yielded to your will.