

## **What's It Gonna Be?**

*A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for A Sermon for Every Sunday.*

Texts: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

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“Then Joshua gathered all the tribes...the elders...the heads...the judges...and the officers...and they presented themselves before God...” The people of Israel have finally arrived in the land that was promised. Joshua, Moses’ successor, is the son of Joseph, the one sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, the one who rose to great power as an aide to an Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph’s presence and leadership during a famine was a catalyst for the Israelites landing in Egypt in the first place—where they grew too numerous in a way that threatened the new Pharaoh who proceeded to enslave them. We know the story from there...Moses... Passover...Exodus...Wilderness...Conflict and Conquest... and now Joshua gathers the tribes for a covenant-making ritual in the Promised Land.

This moment is a significant point of transition for the nation, a decision point about what kind of nation Israel will be and how they will live together in a new context. They bring into that context a reality in which God and militarism and tribalism and religious commandments are all mixed up in a complicated soup. And the historical players, those whose names are etched into the narrative as on

stone monuments—from Abraham to Joseph to Moses to Joshua—carry with them plenty of complicated baggage themselves.

This is a moment when Israel is ostensibly trying to create a community that is grounded in the high ideals of the Mosaic law with love of God and neighbor at the center. But they seek to build that community on conquered land as a people who bear the scars of a history of slavery. Israel has gotten where they are now through violent, military conflict and plunder. And within their own nation there are rifts and rivalries between tribes.

Just so we're tracking, how does this story resonate with our own in this moment in the United States of America?

High ideals and lofty vision, check.

Been through some stuff, check.

Conquered land, check.

Scars of slavery, check.

Imperfect historical leaders who've been both brave and good and selfish and terrible, check.

Fueled and formed by instruments of war, check.

Rifts and rivalries between tribes...well? Check.

God's name and provision and blessing stirred into the mix, check.

A central, grounding narrative of our faith is the story of the exodus from Egypt, the liberation of Israel from slavery and their long journey in the wilderness, trusting in the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. The wilderness narrative is my go-to in times like the ones we're living—or really any time of intense struggle, lack, or uncertainty. The promise is that God receives the cries of the unlikely ones, the powerless and oppressed, acts as an advocate and guide to liberate them and to upend the unjust systems in ways that bring greater equity and lead to a promised land of new life and new community. I love this. It gives me a frame and a hope. And I believe that is appropriate.

But I will say that I don't like thinking about the part of the wilderness wandering that includes the more complicated, unsavory baggage. I don't like thinking about how, in the scriptural record, God gets saddled with responsibility for the violence done as our ancestors marched toward what they believed was their entitled due. I don't like thinking about how the high ideals for the new kind of community in the new land were compromised by the way the new land was acquired through conquest and displacement. I don't like thinking about how there was conflict and

power posturing among the people at every turn along the way. I don't like thinking about how easy it is—even for an oft-conquered people—to tell this story from the perspective of the conqueror without even acknowledging the voices of the conquered.

Sometimes we need to tell the hard, complicated truth of our history to be able to truly step into God's new thing. To tell the hard truth doesn't mean that we erase anything. It doesn't mean that we don't acknowledge the beautiful and brave and honorable parts. Rather it simply asks that we are willing to look at the fullest picture and to name what we've ignored or gotten wrong, where harm has been done, the things that we need to care for if we truly want to live the ideals and values and faith we profess.

We are in a moment in which our nation's history is catching up with us. I'm not learned enough in the various dynamics nor do I have time today to try to sum it all up in any comprehensive way. But I dare say choices that have been made from the very founding our nation—choices made by public officials and by private citizens and residents—have had consequences. And we are currently in a moment of reckoning with all those consequences—the good, bad, and ugly. The struggle to create community aligned with our highest ideals is at a point of boiling over.

We know that poverty and systemic racism leave thousands upon thousands of our siblings vulnerable to indignities and violence of various kinds every day. That reality has only gotten worse in recent years. We know that the impoverished and people of color are most cruelly impacted by a justice system that is often far from just. We know that human-fueled climate change is causing destruction of habitats, loss of species, and a higher frequency of deadly natural disasters. And social media has contributed to a situation in which events of the past number of years have “divided seemingly like-minded people of goodwill: friends, relatives, neighbors, professional colleagues — people of similar backgrounds and who theoretically should align politically, but don’t. And who have a hard time feeling anything but contempt for the other.”<sup>1</sup>

We are in a place where we cannot imagine how others can actually support who or what they support—and vice versa. We cannot even agree on what the issues *are*, much less have a meaningful conversation about them that might leverage our different approaches to possible solutions.

Today we find ourselves in a moment in which we, like the tribes of Israel, have some choices to make. Those choices have at their core the central question: What God will we serve? Because the kind of God we serve makes a difference for better

or for worse. Our faith—the God whom we serve—forms our sense of purpose, our priorities, our values, our understanding of what it means to be human and how to be in community. The God whom we serve will help us know how to respond in the days and months ahead of us as citizens of the Kin-dom of God who are part of this nation that is in such turmoil and nearing another presidential election. The God whom we serve is radically free, unbound to any human political system, party, or politician, yet always working deep among us for the sake of what is right.

And the God whom we serve is the God who gives *us* freedom and power to resist evil and injustice in any form they present themselves. To stand against anything that does harm to our neighbors, that denies dignity, that harms the planet, that intentionally stirs the reptilian energies of our nature instead of the better angels. Our God is the God who helps us have the courage to be honest about our history, to be peacemakers, to love and listen when it would be easier to hate and dismiss. Our God sends Spirit to encourage and inspire people to tirelessly work over years, in ways most people will never know, to do the things that move the needle, that bend the moral arc toward justice, that further the cause of the Kin-dom.

Regardless of the way the winds of politics blow, our choice would be the same: Will we seek to serve a God who calls us to sacred resistance which is—from start to finish— “about love, love that looks upon each person with a desire for their wellbeing, love that looks upon human community with a desire for healing and peace with justice, love that looks into all creation with a desire for mending and reverence, love that is compassionate and merciful, love that is stubborn and sacrificial.”<sup>ii</sup> Patient and kind...not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Not insisting on its own way...not irritable or resentful...not rejoicing in wrongdoing, but rejoicing in the truth. This is how God loves the world. This is how God loves you. This is the love God created us to choose and to live.

I’ve heard it said recently that a focus on love is weak, is for wimps, that whole tough guy thing. I’ll just quote the Bible: love is stronger than death. Hate is easy. Love is the challenge.

At a certain point, like the Israelites of old, we simply have to make a decision about whether we’re serious about loving God and loving neighbor, whether we’re serious about living the promise or just talking about it.

So what’s it gonna be?

I pray that we will strive to be communities of sacred resistance, communities willing to be bold and humble, to risk getting things wrong as we try to get it right for the sake of love and justice, to be a people who can say, trusting in God’s help, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/10/26/gene-weingarten-divided-country-healing/?arc404=true>

<sup>ii</sup> Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli, *Sacred Resistance: A Practical Guide for Christian Witness and Dissent*, ....