

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; Matthew 23:1-12; I Thess. 2:9-13

Joshua 3:7-17 is the story of the beginning of the invasion of Canaan, as Joshua and the people of Israel cross a dry Jordan River bed in order to enter the Promised Land. The particulars of this story are intriguing. God commands Joshua to assemble the people of Israel on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, to bring to the fore the Ark of the Covenant, and for the priests to carry the ark into the river. As their feet touch the water, the water flow will be cut off and the Israelites will cross into Canaan on dry land. Joshua does as he is commanded by God, the river dries up and Israel crosses safely into their Promised Land.

There are several particulars in this story that are strategic to the telling of it. First, this crossing is clearly meant to replicate Israel's crossing of the Reed (Red) Sea in their escape from Egypt. In that crossing, Moses lifted his arms in order to cause the sea to part, but it was the Ark of the Covenant that first crossed the sea on dry land. In this story, it is the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant into the waters that causes this river to part. It is not Joshua's action as it was earlier Moses' action (although he obediently ordered the action), but it was the priests' action who carried the ark and in that carrying, whose feet touched the parting waters.

Second, in 3:15, the text particularly notes that the river was at flood stage. Normally, the Jordan River was about 100 feet wide and 3-10 feet deep. But at flood stage, it could be as much as 600 feet wide and 150 feet in depth. So this seemed to be to the Israelites as significant a crossing as was the crossing of the Reed Sea, crossings occurring respectively at the beginning and at the end of their wilderness sojourn where they were shaped into a nation.

Finally, the text tells us that the waters upstream of the crossing point "stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam". The Hebrew word translated "heap" (*ned*) is the same word used of the Reed Sea crossing in Exodus 15:8 and Psalm 78:13. The river is "dammed" at "Adam" (location unknown, but clearly upstream). The text also tells us that waters on the downstream side toward the Dead Sea are "cut off" (or "run dry"). Thus, the crossing area is not a narrow channel, but a very wide area so that Israel could rush across in a large, single body. This description is clearly meant by the author to compare and contrast with the Reed Sea incident, being seen as every bit as legitimate a miracle and a mammoth crossing as was the parting of the Reed Sea.

What is truly important about this passage, however, is not the miracle of the crossing *per se* (even though it was a most miraculous crossing). What is truly important is God's confirmation of Joshua and the priests as the legitimate political and religious leaders of Israel. God's explanation to Joshua as to why this crossing was necessary is intriguing (after all, they could have invaded Canaan from the south, thus avoiding the Jordan River altogether – their original plan of attack: Numbers 13-14). "The Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses"" (3:7).

What God was doing in this action was to confirm before all Israel that Joshua was the legitimate successor to Moses, the true leader of Israel. This was the first potentially miraculous action Joshua would be undertaking in his commanding of Israel to enter the river. So the consequent

miracle was to be a clear testimony to Israel that Joshua was indeed the God-chosen leader of Israel. As God confirmed Moses' leadership at the Reed Sea, now God was confirming Joshua's leadership at the Jordan River.

But this was also a confirming of the legitimate leadership of the Aaronic and Levitical priesthood of Israel and the securing of their position as the spiritual, liturgical and social leaders of the people. For the waters were to part, not by Joshua's action, but by the faithfulness of the priests who in complete trust in God bore the ark into the roaring and swollen river. Thus, Joshua told the people, "When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap" (vs. 13). And it was so. The priests were thus confirmed to the people as the ark-bearers, the ark being the object that conveyed to Israel God's faithfulness to God's covenant people.

It is equally important to note the level of trust in Yahweh required of the priestly system of Israel. The passage is very explicit that, even though Joshua told Israel what would happen, the actual waters didn't part and allow the priests to carry the ark onto the miraculously-dry land *until their feet actually entered the water* (vs. 15)! That is significant! In the crossing of the Reed Sea, the waters parted at Moses' word and the carriers of the Ark of the Covenant could tell it was dry land (Exod. 14:21-22). At the Jordan, there were no guarantees that the waters would part. All the Israelites had to assure them it would be so was Joshua's word. And Joshua was unproven as a miracle worker!

So it meant that the priests had to step out in faith (literally), stepping into what was an extremely fast moving and violent river (remember, it was at flood stage) that had the potential with its power to sweep any of these priests off their feet and thus bring the ark tumbling down stream. Israel had to step out in faith in order to gain the Promised Land. And the first step began with a miracle! Further, the priests were not only to be the first into the water, thus parting the flood. They were also to stand in the center of the river, holding back the waters through the ark, while the people passed them by (vs. 17). Thus, they were the first in and the last out!

The significance of this act is that it was that the religious system of Israel – the priesthood – who had to demonstrate both to God and to the people their willingness to act in trust and in dependence upon God. Their future success and faithfulness as Israel's religious leaders would likewise depend upon their continued willingness to live in trust and dependence upon the God who was using them to form God's shalom community upon the earth.

Finally, Joshua uses the occasion to confirm to Israel Yahweh's supreme leadership of Israel, carried out through the leadership of Joshua and the Levitical priests of Israel. When Joshua announced to Israel the action God would take through their faithful following of the priests into the flooded river, he said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you (the people of this land): the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan (River)" (vss. 10-11). Joshua was tying the coming miracle directly to God's credibility as the god whom Israel should worship –

He who “causes to be what is caused to be” – the god Yahweh! Thus, God is confirmed as the only legitimate god of Israel.

This passage is pivotal for establishing the legitimacies of Israel: the right of the ruler to rule (in this case, Joshua), the right of the priests to teach, interpret and apply the Law, and thus be the religious, liturgical and social leaders of Israel, and the right of Yahweh to be perceived, worshipped and obeyed as Israel’s unique and only God. The passage is also pivotal for understanding and interpreting the other lessons for today’s lectionary readings.

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37 demonstrates the *chesedh* love of God toward those who love him, particularly when they are in trouble. It begins:

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good for his steadfast love (*chesedh*) endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and south” (107:1-3).

The Psalmist then demonstrates this steadfast and gracious love of God for his people by giving four examples. He does so by holding each of the four groups to the same poetic structure, copying two refrains identically, but also developing new content for each group. The four groups are desert wanderers, people experiencing great pain and darkness (either spiritually or emotionally), the physically ill, and those on the abyss of the ocean.

The form followed in each segment is identical. It begins with the word “some” and then a naming of the problem area (“Some wandered in desert wastes”, “Some went down to the sea in ships”, etc.). The problem that each group faces is then briefly analyzed. Then the segment changes its focus with an introduction of identical words – “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress”, followed by a more full explanation of that deliverance. Finally, the segment resolves itself by concluding “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works for humankind”.

So the order of all four segments is: (1) a problem overwhelming the people of Israel is stated; (2) They recognize their inability to cope with this problem by themselves, and so turn to God in their distress; (3) God hears them and rescues them from their distress.

The selection from this Psalm for today about a troubled group, vss. 4-9, deals with those who “wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town” (vs. 4). Of course, in a semi-arid area like ancient Israel, the fear of getting lost in the desert was a genuine fear and a continuing threat, for any trip through the wilderness faced potential disaster. In this segment, the writer is dealing with refugees, wanderers upon the earth. These are the “strangers”, the “alien”, the “foreigners” so often referred to in the scripture. And most often, the instruction to the Israelites was to “love the stranger, for you were once strangers in Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). In this passage, the Psalmist demonstrates how God cares for the alien and the marginalized, for when “they cried to the Lord in their trouble, he delivered them from their distress and led them by a straight way until they reached an inhabited town” (vss. 6-7). Thus, the Psalmist instructs

such people to “thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things” (vss. 8-9).

In today’s selection of portions of this psalm, verses 33-37 particularly refer to Israel’s departure from the wilderness, their crossing of the Jordan River into Palestine, and their resulting abode there. “(Yahweh) turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in. They sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield” (vss. 33-37).

The author envisions a Canaan where, “because of the wickedness of its inhabitants”, both the land is sick and the people evil. This is changed by the invading presence of Israel who come from the desert through the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, and then turn Palestine into “pools of water” and “springs of water”. The result is the creating of an oasis of plenty and a people who “sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield”.

The Psalmist then ends this hymn with the instruction, “Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love (*chesedh*) of the Lord” (vs. 43)!

Matthew 23:1-12 begins one of the most damning statements in scripture. Jesus followed his previous defense against the Pharisees with words spoken before the crowd, his disciples and before the very religious leaders who had sought to trap him.

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi (“my teacher”), for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (23:1-12).

In this passage, Jesus severely criticizes, dismisses and rejects the leaders of Israel who are allies of Rome and who contribute to the running of the imperial domination of their country while receiving the favor and material rewards from Rome for their compromising allegiance. It is crucial to see this chapter as criticizing Israel’s leaders, not Israel itself. Jesus is not attacking the people who are seeking to live faithfully and who are being exploited by these leaders. He is exclusively attacking their leaders, the people whom the author of the Gospel of John calls “the Judeans” (but often translated as “the Jews”).

Thus, this chapter is not a polemic against either the Jewish people or the Jewish nation. It is a polemic against the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day who have sold their souls for material and

political gain! This is an important differentiation to make, because this passage is often interpreted as being anti-Jewish. It is not; it is anti-leaders!

How do we know that is true? First, if read carefully, it is clear that Jesus speaks critically only of leadership; there is no reference to “ordinary” Jews nor the Jewish people. Jesus’ criticism is reserved exclusively for those who happen to be in the political, economic and religious leadership of Israel at that moment. Second, the passage appears immediately after the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership, as presented in chapters 21-22. It is therefore a logical extension of what has gone before it. Third, the criticism Jesus levels at this leadership is quite similar to the stereotypical terms used to attack political, economic and religious leaders of that time. And that was as true of the Gentile world as it was of the Jewish world. Traditionally, enemies (and in particular, political enemies) would be called in the polemics of the day such terms as “snakes, hypocrites, blind guides, murderers, deceivers”. That was as commonplace an attack as is the attack American politicians make upon each other when they are running for office (the other candidate is lying, is undependable, is being shaped by special interests, or holds to different values than do we; his/her proposal is too little, too much, too late)! When we read this passage, what we are doing is reading a polemic against Israel’s religious, political and economic leadership. And we need to understand it as such. In that light, let’s look at Jesus’ criticism of the national leadership of his day.

First, in 23:1-5, Jesus condemns these religious leaders for what they have done with scripture in their misinterpretation of it. He first recognizes the legitimate teaching office they occupy (“The scribes and pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it”: 23:2a). They have been given both the authority to teach and interpret the scriptures and to provide leadership to Israel (Deut. 17:8-13). But they gravely misuse that privilege (“but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach”: 23:2b), and that misuse makes the legitimate role they should play even more grievous.

Second, in 23:6-12, and for the remainder of this chapter, Jesus presents in the most forceful and confrontive manner how the Jewish religious establishment has used its privileged position in order to secure themselves in power and to create around themselves a hierarchical, unjust and dominating social structure that keeps them at the top and the peasants and people serving them. They have done this by using their right to interpret the scripture and to teach the people as a means to maintain themselves in power. For example, Jesus states in this diatribe “You pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, but you have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (vs. 23).

Jesus’ argument against the Jewish religious aristocracy is that they use scripture for their own purposes – and those purposes are in counter-distinction to God’s intentions for human society. God intends a society of *shalom* – **a political leadership** that seeks justice for all its people but particularly those who are marginalized or powerless, **an economic leadership** that seeks a stewardship of the nation’s wealth so that it might be equitably distributed to all so that poverty could be eliminated, **a religious leadership** that desires to see each Israelite come into a dynamic, personal and corporate relationship with God and with each other – the creation of a relational society.

But what have these religious leaders done with that heritage? They have adapted, interpreted, ignored and adjusted scripture to serve their purposes of maintaining themselves in power at the cost of injustice to Israel's peasants, maintaining themselves in a wealthy life-style that allows many Israelites to fall increasingly into debt and to become servants of the powerful, maintaining themselves in a religion that is built upon control and domination, in league with Israel's worst enemies – the empire of Rome.

A good example of this misinterpretation of the scriptures is what the Jewish religious establishment did at the time of Jesus with the biblical commands regarding observance of the Sabbatical Year (Deut. 15). Deuteronomy commanded that, every seven years a Sabbatical Year was to be proclaimed by the priesthood. For the entirety of that Sabbatical Year, three actions were to be taken by every Israelite throughout the land. First, any who owned or tilled fields were to allow those fields to lie fallow (in order to restore the land in an era when there were no chemical fertilizers). Second, all debts accumulated by any Israelite were to be forgiven. Third, all Israelite slaves were to be set free, and reimbursed for their six years (or less) of slavery. All this was to be done for the purpose of eliminating poverty from the land (15:4).

But the Jewish religious aristocracy at the time of Jesus reinterpreted the laws of the Sabbatical Year and taught that reinterpretation to the people, so that the people began to believe that the reinterpretation was the truth. Wanting to be perceived as leaders obedient to the Law of Moses, the religious aristocracy re-established the Sabbatical Year after centuries of neglect. But then they taught only one of the three requirements – the only requirement that would guarantee that it would be the poor farmers and not the religious leaders who would be hurt by observance of the Year – the regulation on letting the land lie fallow. The religious establishment never even mentioned to the people that there were two other regulations – to forgive all debts and to set free all slaves – because that would hurt their economic and political position. So the people were kept in ignorance about the true stipulations of the Sabbatical Year. Thus, the Jewish religious aristocracy profited from that ignorance, and even worse, they had used God's Word both to accomplish the exact opposite as that word was intended to achieve and, consequently, to turn the nation away from God's intentions for it. Jesus was enraged at the duplicity and the corruption of Israelite society by this misuse of the legitimate authority the religious leaders of Israel had been given under Moses and Joshua.

The primary thrust of this entire chapter is not simply Jesus' anger at his nation's leadership for their abuse and misuse of their office. It is despair – deep despair over these leaders. It is clear from this and the preceding passages (chs. 21-22) that Jesus has concluded that these leaders are now beyond redemption, that it is irrelevant what they may now say or do. They are set in their commitment to the course they are pursuing, and the values upon which that commitment is based. Yet it is clear to Jesus and even other observers that the continued pursuit of those values and that commitment will eventually lead to the collapse of the nation. They are committed above all to maintain themselves in power and to build their wealth, and to use religion as the vehicle for accomplishing that objective. And although it is clear to all that operating out of such greed, lust for power and selfishness will lead to collapse of the nation, these leaders are not about to change their ways – even if they eventually destroy the country (which, of course, they did less than 40 years later).

There is a second lesson from this scripture that is equally as important as is the first – that Jesus despaired over the policies and practices of those who were in authority, because they used their power to feed their own greed, domination and selfishness – even when that placed their entire nation and its people at the risk of inevitable collapse and even annihilation. The second lesson of this passage which it is particularly important for the church to recognize is what this passage teaches about the confrontative Jesus. Jesus recognized that confrontation was absolutely necessary for change, because without the skill and willingness to use confrontation, no significant change can ever occur in the religious institution, in the neighborhood surrounding that institution, in its city or in its nation.

Confrontation is an integral part of any empowering process. Christians often have trouble with it because we believe it to be inconsistent with a loving, Christ like faith. But confrontation is the healthy process that enables humans to resolve pronounced differences between them. You can't hope to bring about significant change – whether in a church, a Christian organization or in the world – and avoid confrontation.

One of the difficulties we have with confrontation is that it seems so violent. But in reality, confrontation and violence are opposites. Confrontation is the face-to-face, direct encounter between people seeking resolution. It is vigorous negotiation. But the purpose of confrontation is not a ventilation of one's hostilities but the resolution of the difference between people and groups. The word *confrontation* literally means “at foreheads” (*con* – “at” or “with”; *front* – “forehead”), so named by the ancients because when we confront we get “in each other's face”!

Violence, on the other hand, is the exercise of physical force in order to gain one's own way. The objective of confrontation is resolution; the objective of violence is to win! Whether it is a person or a government that is acting violently, the purpose of such violence is to defeat the opposition, not to come to a negotiated settlement. In a profound sense, violence is often an indication that confrontation has failed. People resort to violence when their efforts to confront a system have met – not with the decision of the system to negotiate, but with the system either stonewalling or reacting violently itself.

One of the most confrontational people in the Bible was Jesus. How confrontational was he? Well, simply consider the number of incidents in the ministry of Jesus that appear in just one of the Gospels – Luke. There are 133 stories or incidents recorded in Luke in which the adult Jesus figures. Of those 133 stories, 116 are confrontational in nature. The remainder is primarily miracle or teaching stories.

Of the 116 incidents in which Jesus was confrontational, 66 were confrontations of representatives of the religious, political or economic systems of either Israel or Rome, 45 were confrontations by Jesus of his disciples or followers and 10 were confrontations of demons. One would have expected Jesus to confront the systems and demons. But given the significant number of confrontation by Jesus of his disciples and friends, one would have to consider him an equal opportunity agitator!

The inevitable question we must ask about Jesus' confrontational ministry is, What is at the heart of such confrontation? What was driving Jesus to confront friend and foe alike? That question is perhaps most profoundly answered in today's Gospel lesson – Matthew 23.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus has been calling on these religious leaders to see how they've misused the law by building up the power and wealth of Israel's elite of which they are a part, while covering their actions in a pious veneer. He had repeatedly called upon them to embrace the full Jubilee, to redistribute wealth so that poverty would be eliminated and to proclaim both spiritual and physical liberty throughout the land. But they had refused, preferring to maintain themselves in positions of power and wealth rather than to seek the shalom of their people. Now their resistance to Jesus' message had built to a crescendo, and Jesus burst forth in what can only be called a diatribe against them (read Matthew 23:1-39 out loud and with conviction, and you will realize that Jesus was certainly not being "nice, sweet or gentle").

Jesus' final attack begins with the biting words, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they say and follow it; **but do not do as they do**, for they do not practice what they teach" (Mt. 23:2-3). That sets the theme for the remainder of the attack, as Jesus proclaims seven "woes" against these leaders. But Jesus' intention, in confronting the Pharisees comes out most clearly and poignantly in the closing lines of his argument against them. "You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate" (Mt. 23:33, 37-39).

The English word "anger" comes from the ancient Norse word, *angor* which means, "grief"! It was grief that was at the heart of Jesus' confrontation of the religious leaders of Israel (the Pharisees and scribes), the economic system of Israel (the Sadducees, priests, high priest and Jerusalem religious aristocracy) and the political system (Pilate representing Rome, the high priest and Herod Antipas representing the local political order). Jesus confronted them because they were the enemies of the people and were committed to building their own power rather than building the shalom community of Israel.

Jesus also confronted inside the community of faith. He confronted the disciples and his friends in order to prepare them for leadership of the church and for ministry with the poor and powerless, and to enable them to understand and articulate the values and vision of the shalom community. The only people Jesus rarely confronted were the poor, marginalized or weak. They already had enough dumped on them!

What drove Jesus to so relentlessly confront friend and foe alike? It was love. Jesus confronted out of love for those powerful Pharisees and scribes who could not see that their policies of greed and lust for power would bring about the destruction of their nation. He confronted out of love for the people who would eventually become the victims of the system's lust for unilateral power that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem. He confronted out of love for his disciples, who were responsible for building the vision of the shalom community, the kingdom of God, out of the destruction those Pharisees and scribes would bring upon their own people.

Because he loved the people and his disciples and the nation's leaders so much, Jesus was agitational. He was seeking to agitate because only out of extreme discomfort and agitation would (1) people be sufficiently motivated to change and (2) systems be forced to change or face themselves. The first did happen to some degree – some people profoundly changed and became the rock upon which Christ would build his church, seeking the transformation of Roman and Jewish society. Other people didn't change and missed the greatest revolution in human history. The systems would not change at all; they would not face themselves, but blindly sped on in their greed and lust for unilateral power – and their destruction at the hands of Rome became inevitable. And therefore Jesus grieved, and expressed that grief in anger designed to get a response from the people and from the leaders. Thus, in the light of how both people and leaders chose to respond, Jesus would weep over the city. He would weep over it. And he would die for it. For “how can you escape being sentenced to hell?”

I Thessalonians 2:9-13 presents Paul's defense against apparent critics that his leadership is indeed legitimate and is in the tradition of Jesus' leadership as opposed to the leadership of the Jewish religious aristocracy (with whom he was at one time associated). He does this by reminding the Thessalonians of three realities in regards both to his ministry and the ministries of his companions.

First, Paul points out that, while he was in Thessalonica, he did not expect them to support him but rather he earned his own way. This he did by exercising his trade (I Thess. 2:9). Neither he nor his companions asked the Thessalonians for anything nor benefited from them financially in any way (unlike the Jewish religious establishment benefited from their leadership of the Jews).

Both Paul and his companions lived strict lives of moral and ethical rectitude before the Thessalonians (2:10). They were neither profligate as were Gentile religious leaders nor were they rapacious while being sanctimonious, as were the Jewish leaders.

They taught the faith to the Thessalonians, carefully and soundly exegeting and teaching the scriptures to them as well as the teachings of Jesus and of the apostolic church, while calling them to lead worthy lives for Christ and his kingdom (2:11-12). They did not use the scriptures as ways to benefit their own causes or to increase their power, control or wealth, as did Israel's religious establishment.

Why, Paul asked, did he do this? He earned his own way, lived a moral and ethical life and carefully taught the faith and the scriptures in order that the Thessalonians would embrace Christ for themselves and embrace God's kingdom chosen for them by God himself. “We give thanks to God that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers” (2:13), Paul concluded. You were called into God's kingdom through our teaching, Paul in essence is saying. You have become believers in its power and you enjoy its life here and now, while you long for the day when you will enter into its fullness. This brings the greatest satisfaction to us, Paul concludes, because we see you growing into the church God called you to be, and thus we know that, through your growth, we have been faithful to the furtherance of the gospel for which we had been made responsible by God. We, like Jesus, Moses, Joshua and the Levitical priests

are faithful and legitimate leaders, and are not illegitimate as the (then-present) Jewish clergy aristocracy has become!

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