

32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 12, 2017  
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

## Child of the Covenant

In a few minutes, we will baptize Kent Joseph Johnson. Kent is named after his maternal and fraternal great-grandfathers, which is a heavy load to lay on a fellow of his current size. However, Kent shows every sign that he will live up to the challenge.

There is a sense in which all of us are called to live up to the example set by those who have gone before us. Kent's great granddaddies were part of that marvelous "Greatest Generation" that fought World War II and made so many sacrifices to secure the future for their children and their children's children. One of the reasons our country is in such turmoil right now is that we have forgotten to follow what was good in that generation's example.

Yet, to be honest, there is also a sense in which you and I are called to live down the example set by some who have gone before us. Not everything our ancestors did is praiseworthy, and some of it is shameful.

If you want to feel the weight of that shame, you could walk down Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, where General Robert E. Lee stares down at you mounted high upon his horse Traveler. But you don't have to go that far. All you have to do is look up there at the north gallery, where certain of our brothers and sisters in Christ were once relegated.

There was a time not so long ago when members of this church "owned" other members of this church. The abomination of chattel slavery is mixed into the mortar that holds the bricks of this old sanctuary together. That's something we, the baptized who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, should never forget.

So long as this sanctuary stands, the evidence of blacks lives that didn't matter stands – regardless of what happens to the statues of Confederate generals.

In our Old Testament lection this morning, we encounter more of our ancestors. They go back further than the Greatest Generation or even the generation that built this sanctuary. Today's reading takes us all the way back to the time our ancestors in the faith assembled on the border of Canaan, the Promised Land, to hear an address by an aging general named Joshua.

According to the Biblical account, the people of Israel are embarking on yet another attempt enter the land of Canaan. Centuries before, God had promised that land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses, who had led the people out of bondage in Egypt, had attempted an insurgency 38 years earlier, but that attempt had ended in disaster.

Now Moses is dead, and Joshua is about to try again. He calls the people together at a place called Shechem, and demands that they make a choice. Will they serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who set them free, or will they serve some other?

This text, we must admit, is rooted in the concept of holy war (Hebrew, *herem*). According to the Book of Deuteronomy, Joshua's assignment from the Lord is to cleanse Canaan of all non-Israelites and eliminate all temptations to worship other gods. **"You shall not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them,"** the Lord tells Joshua.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the lives of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, and all the other tribes who currently live in Canaan don't matter. The divine mandate underlying the text is total destruction.

That's the uncomfortable truth of the matter, and attempts to spiritualize the text cannot make that truth go away. This horrific genocidal directive given to Joshua has been used on more than one occasion to justify subsequent acts of violence and genocide.

We could, I suppose, remove the books of Joshua and Deuteronomy from our Bibles. That would have made Thomas Jefferson happy. But that would be like tearing down the statues on Monument Avenue and replacing them with rainbows and smiley faces.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 20:16-18

We can't run away from the past or from these texts. Instead, we need to balance them with other texts that speak of turning the other cheek, loving neighbors as ourselves, forgiving enemies, and living peaceably with all.

There was a time when we believed that God sanctioned – even demanded – violence, war, and destruction. We once thought that slavery was ordained by God, and that the Bible justifies one human being owning another. We once thought that that black lives don't matter, that brown lives don't matter, that red lives don't matter, that yellow lives don't matter. We have a long history of using the Bible to justify all manner of evil, and yet that same Bible calls us to repentance, and teaches us to sing,

*Red and yellow, black and white,  
They are precious in his sight,  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

There is an ugly dimension to this text from Joshua, but there is also a word we need to hear, for Shechem is a place of covenantal renewal. It's the place where our ancestors recall a promise from God and make a promise of their own.

"Whom will you serve?" Joshua asks the people at Shechem. "Make up your mind right now, before we take another step toward the Promised Land."

"We'll serve the Lord," the people respond.

"Oh, no you won't," Joshua replies. "You'll forget the God who set you free and you'll soon be serving other gods."

"Oh no, we won't."

"Oh yes, you will."

"Oh no, we won't."

"O.K.," Joshua says. **"You are witnesses to yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord."**

**“Yes, we are witnesses . . . The Lord our God we will serve and him we will obey.”**

And so, at Shechem, the covenant between God and God’s people was renewed. The Lord would keep his promise, and the people would serve only the Lord.

A path leads from Shechem to this baptismal font. It has not been a straight path, and there have been many, many times when God’s people have been wrong about what God expects of us.

Over and over, God has called us back, and showed us where we strayed. Sometimes God spoke with a “still, small voice,” and sometimes God spoke with the thunder of Jeremiah, or Amos, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Sometimes we have needed a gentle nudge and sometimes we have needed a swift kick in the pants.

But, no matter how faithless we have been, no matter how far we have wandered, no matter how we have twisted and contorted history to justify our sin, God has not failed to keep faith with us.

God keeps God’s promises. Nowhere is that truth more evident than here, in these waters of baptism. Here is grace unmerited. Here is promise renewed. Here is the covenant that God initiates, the relationship with God we cannot earn. Here God says to us yet again, **“I will be your God, and you will be my people.”**

Here we die to sin and here we are raised to new life. In these covenantal waters, all lives matter.

Kent Joseph is a child of that covenant. And so are we.

Thanks be to God.