Sermon: A Nation Under God
Scripture: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: November 8, 2026

One of the things that we parish ministers, we preachers, have to manage is the navigation from here in the pulpit of church and politics. How much do we say from up here and how much do we avoid? How do we help to bring the sacred text to bear upon the lives of our congregations, their personal and corporate lives, in such a way that our own political perspective doesn't get privileged air time way up here above you all. Can we speak relevantly to the current world without touching into the political realm and how do we do that so it doesn't make some feel all warm and justified and others cold and irritated. It is really quite tricky, I have to say. And I have heard it all in my years in ministry.

"I wish you wouldn't bring politics into your preaching so much. I come here for spiritual nurture and support not to hear more politics." I understand that. It's usually spoken by someone who disagrees with how I'm connecting the scripture to our politics.

Or "I wish you would address the political issues of the day more than you do." Is what I can get as well… of course usually by those who tend to know that my political perspective jives with their own.

In the aftermath of 9/11 when I was serving the church in Vermont, I was challenging in some sermons the drumbeat toward war that was going on by the one who now seems like a saint - George Bush - and made a couple people angry who ended up leaving the church. I have to say, I was right, it was a bad bad idea to respond to that with war. But still was I right

to preach on it, like I did? Most people were really appreciative but those two people weren't and didn't feel like they could be in a church that wasn't supporting America.

More recently, someone was angry and wrote me a letter after my pastoral letter about the overturning of Roe v Wade. It was fair enough and I'm glad they felt like they could share their discomfort with what I had written. A couple people came to my office to share their discomfort about Rev. Judy and my going to South Dakota with the clergy call to challenge the pipeline there in my first couple years here. I've had conversations with those who have expressed how tired they are of politics in the outside world, that they don't want it in church as well. I do appreciate and want to encourage the honest and fair exchange about it, but I also want to share how tricky it is. It's always on my mind, every time I sit down to write a sermon. And one of my ways I try to address it, is if I have a more politically charged sermon, I try to lay off and offer more personal-spirituality-geared sermons the next week or few weeks so that at least there's a balance.

I think it's an important struggle and I'd say the scriptures really don't give us a choice but to grapple with it. It's not like the scriptures are devoid of politics. To personalize and spiritualize everything and disconnect it from our lives in the polis or the civic realm just doesn't make sense. And yet, it's also true that the Gospel, the Good News, the teachings in our scripture should run beneath political divides, right? Shouldn't the Gospel be as challenging to the right as it is to the left, to the reds as to the blues…and yet, honestly, I do find my political perspective justified in scripture much more than the other side, which gives me - and should give me - pause…

am I not getting to the deeper truth and heart of it, if it's usually one side of the political equation that I am landing on time and again.

It's also one of the reasons I'm afraid that we become more monolithic in our churches than we should be. You've maybe heard it said that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Often that's referring to racial divides, but it also falls on political lines as well… because of the politics of preacher. Surely there are ministers who navigate that better than others and can hold together people from different political perspectives within their congregation which we should be able to do since we are under the headship of Christ not political party or viewpoint. But I would guess that's usually accomplished by making it more personal and "spiritual" and avoiding the political, which just doesn't seem quite right either.

Ok, enough of my sob story - "it's so hard being a preacher". And so without further ado, let me go waltzing into the political tinder box of Israel's history that we get here in the Book of Joshua. There are 2 primary reasons why you haven't heard me or probably many ministers at all over the course of your life in whatever church you've attended, preaching on the book of Joshua. Maybe you didn't even know there was a book of Joshua in the Bible… other than you knew Lyle Lovett has an awesome album called "Joshua Judges Ruth". But the 2 reasons you don't hear Joshua preached on despite the fact that it is central to the story of the people of Israel (and pretty important to Christianity as well) is because it is bloody and it is boring. The first half is terribly violent in Israel's account of how they came into Canaan, the land promised by God to them from the time of Abraham, and once they conquer and destroy the people there, the second half becomes terribly tedious as the people of Israel are divided up

into tribes and distributed onto various tracts of land. Second half sounds a lot like this:

> “So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. **8** East of the Jordan (on the other side from Jericho) they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh.” (Joshua 20:7-9)

The book of Joshua though, despite is violence and tediousness, and absence in Christian worship, is in no way insignificant. If you remember, Moses wasn’t allowed to bring the Israelites from the wilderness into the promised land after the escape from slavery in Egypt and that long 40 year wandering in the wilderness. He died just before entering the promised land and it was Joshua who got to lead the people into the land promised from days of old. The Book of Joshua holds the story of the fall of Jericho when the people of Israel marched around the walls once a day for 6 days with the ark of the covenant, blowing the shofar until the walls fell. Then they went in and destroyed every living thing they could destroy, so the story goes. They destroyed everything except for one woman and her family. She was Rahab, a prostitute, who had housed the Israelite spies. She was spared and believe it or not she shows up in the New Testament a couple times, not least of which is in the genealogy of the one we call savior and lord, Jesus. Whaaaaat a sex worker foreigner in Jesus genealogy? I don’t mean to get all political on ya, but I think there are a lot of Christians and

Americans who would not be ok with Jesus' "many-greats" grandmother and deport her back to where she came from. I'm just sayin".

And then also, related to the importance of the Book of Joshua, there's of course the fact that in Hebrew the name Jesus is Jeshua or Joshua. So there's something there too. Joshua leads the people of Israel into the promised land. Jesus leads a new Israel into a new and promised day. The Gospel of Mark leans into this association more than the other Gospels, representing Jesus storming into the promised land not to destroy the enemy but to confront the spiritual forces of evil.

So it's significant… but also it really is pretty disturbing. The Book of Joshua has God directing the Israelites to go into Canaan and take the land and destroy all that lives there, basically, genocide and dispossession of the land in the name of the Lord. That's how the people of Israel enter into the promised land. And that little story is not so little, but looms quite large in western consciousness and has been used quite explicitly to justify terrible terrible violence. Of course the Christian crusades against Muslims in the middle ages used this story to justify their violence, marching forth with a cross of all things, on their flags. The European settlers to the Americas used it in their destruction of the indigenous people in this land. The whole notion of manifest destiny being derived from God's offering a promised land to the faithful. And then 20th century atrocities by extremists have referenced it as well, like the Rwandan genocide. It has also been a backdrop to the Israel-Palestine conflict all along and to the current day as the Israeli government continues to destroy Palestinian lives in response to the atrocities of Oct 7th and regularly in the practice of dispossessing Palestinians from the land of Israel through settlements and walls and checkpoints. I should caveat my saying this by adding that I am

commenting on brutal policies of the Israeli government and not indicting Jewish people who do deserve a land where they are safe and can live in peace and fall all along the political perspective as we all do.

But the claim that “The One God is on our side” started here with the Hebrew scriptures… or better to say a distortion of the Hebrew scriptures. True that here God is portrayed as being violent and brutal in God’s treatment of other nations and even requires that of the people of Israel too. But it’s important to place the story in context before dismissing Hebrew scriptures as presenting a God of violence and wrath and contrasting that with the God of Jesus being a God of love and peace. That approach is too-often used as a trope to justify anti-semetic attitudes toward Jews.

So let’s remember the context and read clearly what is happening with the conquest of the Promised Land. First of all, remember the people of Israel are coming out of slavery when they are in the wilderness and preparing to enter the Promised Land. The story of Joshua and the violent conquest of the promised land is a story of those on the bottom, those used and abused, confronting and defeating empires of power and domination, Kings and oppressors. It’s better to hear this like the stories of slaves rising up violently to overthrow plantation owners in the south, which honestly is hard not to root for them, right? It is NOT already wealthy and dominant powers justifying their violence against others by claiming it’s God’s will. It’s the oppressed rising up. So that’s one point to be made.

Also, in a similar vain, the Torah, the first 5 books of the Hebrew scripture makes it clear that establishing Israel as a nation stands over and against the corrupt and evil ways of empire, the large concentration of power that uses and dehumanizes people for the good of the few at the

top. The point of the formation of the nation of Israel was to offer an alternative that was supposed to be based upon the Kingship of God which creates a decentralized national presence, a peaceable society, that values each person and even has a particular focus on protecting the marginalized. What becomes really clear in a faithful reading of Joshua, despite the troubling violence commanded by God is why the violence is required. Not because God favors Israel for who they are and hates the Canannites for who they are, but that the Canaanites in their power, domination and control are practicing evil ways and there are consequences for that evil. The Jews are not exempt from this judgement of God for acting in evil ways just because they are the chosen nation either.

In the passage for today, in Joshua's farewell speech before his death - he says to the people of Israel, "who you gonna serve" and they say "the Lord God." And Joshua says "no your not!" and They say "yes we are." "No, you're not!" Joshua is far too familiar with the ways of the people in turning to other gods and breaking the covenant God has made with them in all sorts of ways. And Joshua reminds them, "Ok obey God, renew the covenant, but if you don't follow, if you look to other gods, if you do evil and not good the hammer will come down on your head as well."

Israel is supposed to be a light unto the nations to show a different way of being a collective that is based not upon domination and control and violence but upon God's law and God's love, not the power of Kings and the domination of the powerful and wealthy. At one point in the Book of Samuel, there's this exchange with the prophet and God who tells the newly formed nation - "I am your King" - and they say "no, we want a human King to rule over us like other nations or we'll be destroyed!" And

God says “Don’t do it. I am your King and if you have a human King then he will act with unbridled absolute power and you know what will happen?” This is what the scripture says “your sons will be conscripted into war and your daughters will be taken to be servants and your lands will be seized to make the King and his family rich and you’ll be taxed to death for their benefit!” And the people of Israel are like “lalala, we want a King!” And God is like “OK…” and as their own story goes which they wrote, it’s not long before Israel reaps the consequences of its choice and loses their land that they had taken over and becomes a scattered nation lost in exile, And that, to them, is understood as a direct consequence of their not being faithful to a faithful and loving God. They blew it like we all blow it and like all nations blow it and there are consequences to not living aligned to God’s law and love.

And so here’s the arc of the story - a broken people without a land, slaves in Egypt, wanderers in the wilderness, were claimed by God as the chosen people, and given a land with the understanding that they remain faithful to the covenant God established with them to thus become a light to other nations to bear witness to the presence of the One True God who not only is real, the creator of all things and holds all of existence in his hands, but has for us a way of living together under God’s laws that is true and distinct and just. And by demonstrating this they’ll call all people together to live in the harmony and peace that God intended. That’s the story and that was the plan.

But then Israel, according to their own scripture, failed in their covenant with God and they were exiled from the land. So when Jesus comes on the scene at the turn of the millennia in Palestine on the promised land himself, it’s owned so to speak by Rome, the occupying

power at the time. And to Jesus the coming Kingdom of God that he preaches, is not about nation or about territory. So in many ways Jesus is the anti-Joshua who comes into the promised land and teaches servanthood not domination as the way to be a light to nations. He teaches nonpossessiveness not accumulated wealth as the way of life. He teaches victory through suffering not victory through conquest.

Centralized power and territory claiming and maintenance and wealth accumulation is not possible in this world at least without violence. And this is why Jesus was promoting a different non-centralized, non-territory oriented, non-accumulating way of being God's people, of being a light to the nations. And down through the ages, despite Jesus' obvious teachings and what he was holding out for, his followers have twisted themselves into pretzels to take his message and combine it with nation building and nation promoting and nation expanding. This has not only done violence to Jesus' message but it has done violence to so many people as well. It's why this latest thrust in our country of Christian nationalism is so deeply problematic and unbiblical even though its proponents claim to be biblical literalists.

You simply can't combine well Jesus' message, the Gospel, and nation building and nation running.

I love the sense I get of James Talarico and Adam Hamilton. It is so refreshing to have strong public Christian voices that are progressive. And to speak for myself, I am so glad they won to temper the conservative Christian voices in our government who present such a narrow and at times violent and toxic masculine versions of our faith. But as I celebrate them, I also have some caution about them for just this reason. It is difficult and maybe it is impossible to merge Christian faith with the making of laws and securing of the well-being of a nation. I'd surely rather have them in office

than the alternatives but the Christian project, the Jesus Way, the Gospel does not go well with the propping up and sustaining of nations and the running of countries. The state and its survival sets the agenda. Ultimately there will and there should be tension between God's people and the nations. The Blue Wave does not mean that finally God is pleased with our nation anymore than God would be pleased if we turned this nation into a Christian dominated nation under conservative values as many on the Republican side of the country seem to want to do.

It's not that we as Americans are to be a light to the nations, but that we as followers of Jesus are to be a light, not hiding under a bushel the ways of Christ that we are called to, but allowing our lives to give light to all in the house. Of course we've got to live within the politics and nations and the dynamics of our day but as Christians, as followers of Jesus we've also got to march to the rhythm of a different drummer, not Democrat, not Republican, not even American or as members of a global community but as children of God, a God who expects us to be involved in the work of healing and loving and reconciling and forgiving.

We are all, everyone of us nations around this globe, are "nations under God" and under God we are indivisible and should be facilitating liberty and justice for all, for all our own and for all of everybody else's as well. We are under One God and He is a God of unity and love. How this week in our little mini-nations of the circles we run in, can we be a lightfor all in the house? Amen.

2 articles that informed this sermon are:

1. *Hinkley, Paul, "The Theology of the Divine Warrior in the Book of Joshua"*

https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/37-3_Joshua_And_Judges/The%20Theology%20of%20the%20Divine%20Warrior%20in%20the%20Book%20of%20Joshua.pdf

2. Grimsrud, Ted, “Saving the Joshua Story” https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ted-grimsrud-saving-the-joshua-story