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Strong and Courageous
Joshua 1-6; Numbers 14:26-35

During the Exodus, when Moses had led the Children of Israel to the edge of the Promised Land, he sent twelve spies into the land to scout it out. Ten of those spies came back in terror, claiming that the people of the land were huge and had walled cities. They could never conquer those people. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, disagreed, saying that God would help them, but the Children of Israel chose fear over faith and turned back to the desert. We read God's response to the people's fear in Numbers chapter 14, verses 26-35:

²⁶And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: ²⁷How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me. ²⁸Say to them, 'As I live', says the Lord, 'I will do to you the very things I heard you say: ²⁹your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upwards, who have complained against me, ³⁰not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. ³²But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. ³³And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. ³⁴According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.' ³⁵I the Lord have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.

And so it happened. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, until all the generation that had chosen fear over faith had died, except for Caleb and Joshua, who became Moses' right hand man. At the end of that time, Moses led the next generation to the edge of Canaan – close enough that they could go up a mountain and see it across the Jordan River. There Moses died.

Put yourself in Joshua's place. Moses hadn't always been popular – well, the people had kvetched for forty years – but even his worst enemy had to admit he was a towering figure. The people had seen him bring plagues on Egypt, raise his staff and part the Red Sea, bring water from the rock, and produce bread from the heavens. Sure, all those mighty works had actually been done by God, but Moses was the one the people had seen. As Moses' designated successor, Joshua had some very large sandals to fill. Worse, the task he had been left was the one task Moses had never accomplished: lead the people into Canaan and capture the land. So now what?

And the Lord spoke to Joshua. "Moses, my servant, is dead. But I am with you, Joshua. Rise up. Take the people into the land. I promise this: every place your foot touches will be yours. No one can stand in your way, because I stand with you. So be strong and courageous. Keep the people in my covenant, following all the instructions that Moses gave you, and you have no cause to fear. Again, be strong and courageous." Joshua received this promise – and this

charge – and his heart swelled with purpose. Then he looked across the Jordan River, where the Canaanite city of Jericho stood. It was really big, and it had huge walls, and Joshua said to himself, “Yes, well, it wouldn’t hurt to be *cautious*. I’ll send a couple of scouts across the river to check out the city before we go any farther.”

Joshua chose two young men and sent them to Jericho, just to see what was there. And they saw what was there. So many people and shops selling things they’d never dreamed existed and was that wine? Their parents had told them about that. And what is that woman over there on the street corner, talking to every man who passes by? Is she a . . . ? Iowa farm boys arriving in Paris in 1918 would have been no more astonished. The two scouts went straight to that woman, who was named Rahab, who took them home with her. Now the leaders of Jericho were well aware that an army of foreigners was camped across the river from them. They had even heard that those foreigners – Hab’rus, or something like that – had already conquered two kings in that land across the river. So when they got word that two wide-eyed rubes in rustic clothes were wandering around, they put two and two together, and they traced them to Rahab’s place.

“Quick!” Rahab said. “To the roof. I’ve got stalks of flax drying up there. Get under the flax and *don’t move*.” She went to the door. “Hello, officer. Come in. Haven’t seen you in a while. Official business? Why would you be interested stuffy old business? Could I get you a drink? Oh, very well. What is it? Oh, yes! The hayseeds! Of course they were here, with eyes as big as coins. Unfortunately for them, though, they had no actual coins. I may be cheap, but I’m not free. I sent them away. Yes, I did actually; they went out the front gate and turned south. Of course I’m sure. Do I strike you as a woman who doesn’t know her mind?”

Rahab watched them leave, then went up to the roof. “They’re gone for now, but you stay hidden until dark. I’ll let you down the outside wall then. Go north into the wilderness and stay there for three days. Then cross the river and go report back to your people.”

And the scouts said, “Yes, ma’am. Um, ma’am? Why are you helping us?”

Rahab looked at them. “Because I know that your God is with you, and your God cannot be stopped. I have heard how your God brought you out of Egypt, kept you alive in the desert, and brought you this far. I have no idea why your leader’s piddling around sending scouts, but I’m glad. Promise me that when you capture Jericho, I and my family will be spared.”

And the scouts said, “Yes, ma’am.” They worked out a way for Rahab to mark her home for protection – a scarlet string on the window – and three days later, the scouts got back to Joshua. “Well?” he asked. “What do you think? Can we take it?” They replied, “Yes, we can. Because our God is with us, and nothing can stop our God.” Joshua said, “You learned *that* from going to Jericho?”

“Yes, sir. You see, there’s a Canaanite woman there named Rahab who has more faith in our God than any of us. Um . . . she saved our lives, and we promised to save her, too.”

The next morning, the Israelites set out, with priests in the lead, bearing the Ark of the Covenant. Between them and Jericho, however, was the Jordan River, and it was at flood stage –

hard enough for one or two people to cross, let alone an army. “Don’t worry about the river!” Joshua called, trying to sound confident. “God is with us! Get ready for a miracle!”

“What miracle, Joshua?” someone asked.

“Just wait and see! It’ll be great! Just follow the Ark . . . Um, God? What are we going to do about the river?”

And God said to Joshua, “You’ll be fine. Send the Ark first. You’ll see the water dry up around the priests’ feet.”

That was it. God doesn’t often give detailed instructions. They came to the Jordan, and the priests bearing the Ark stopped at the edge of the swollen river and looked expectantly at Joshua. Nothing happened.

“God will make a way for us,” Joshua said.

There was a long silence.

“You know,” one of the priests said, “my mother says that when Moses parted the sea, he held out his rod over the water. You don’t happen to have a stick, do you? Just a thought.”

Nothing. Joshua’s mind was racing. What had God said?

“I think . . . I think we just start.” The priests looked at the river, then looked back at Joshua. “It was something God said about the water around your feet.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Hey, Josh, I’ve got something in my eye. You want to take my end while I take care of it?”

Joshua swallowed. “I mean it. Start walking.” The priests looked at each other, then started into the flood. The priests in front were already knee deep before the priests in back even stepped in, but as soon as they did, there was a boom somewhere, and the water coming from upstream slowed. The river level dropped, and the priests kept walking. By the time they were in the center, the river was dry. “You stay there,” Joshua called to the priests. Then he looked at his army. “Well? What are you waiting for? Go on.”

Joshua watched the bemused Israelites cross the Jordan on dry ground, trying not to look surprised himself. As they passed, he stopped twelve young men, one from each of the twelve tribes, and told them to grab a stone from the riverbed as they went through – the biggest one they could carry. When the army was across, Joshua followed, and last of all came the priests with the Ark. As soon as they reached the bank, there was another crash upstream, and the river came raging back with a vengeance. Joshua pointed at a spot overlooking the river and told his twelve chosen men to pile there the stones they had brought from the river.

“What’s that for, Joshua?”

“It’s a monument. Sort of a reminder, because sometimes people forget the things that God has done for them in the past. You know?”

The Israelite army made camp in the plain outside Jericho, and Joshua called all his captains together. “When do we attack?” one asked. Joshua said, “Not yet. There’s something we need to do first. We need all our men to be circumcised.”

“Say what?”

“I know while we were in the desert, we didn’t keep up with that very well, but that is something that God told Abraham to –”

“Joshua, can I talk to you privately for a minute? Listen, that thing at the river was great, and we’re all behind you, but are you sure you want to disable your whole army right now?”

“Yeah, it’s not smart. I know,” Joshua said. Then he spoke to everyone. “Listen, people. If we win this battle, let alone conquer this whole land, it’s not going to be because of our abilities or disabilities. It will be because we’re in covenant with God. And I’m thinking that means the covenant with Abraham as well as the covenant of Sinai. How many flint knives do we have?”

So they paused for several days, camped outside the massive walls of Jericho. While they waited, Joshua patrolled the perimeter constantly, and one day he came upon a man standing by the path, as if waiting for him, a man holding a sword. Joshua stepped closer. “Are you with us? Or are you with our enemies?” he demanded brusquely.

“No.”

Joshua stared at him, confused.

“I’m the commander of the armies of God,” the man said. “I don’t play that with-us-or-against-us game. I am here.”

Joshua fell to the ground. “What do you wish to say to me, my lord?”

“I already said it,” the man replied. “Now, take off your sandals. This is holy ground.”

At last the Israelites were healed and mobile again, and once again Joshua’s captains gathered before him to get their orders. “What do you want us to do?”

“You mean, what does *the Lord* want us to do.”

“Yeah, that thing,” they said.

“He wants us to line up first thing tomorrow behind the Ark and seven priests with ram’s horns. They’ll blow the horns, and we’ll follow behind them in complete silence, all the way around the city.”

“Um. All right. And then what?”

“Then we come back to camp.”

“No, really, Joshua. What do you want us to –?”

“On the second day, we’ll do the same thing. And the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth.”

“Walk around the city in silence, while the priests blow horns?”

“That’s it.”

“Six days.”

“But the seventh day will be different. On the seventh day, we’ll walk around the city seven times, and the priests will blow the horns after each circuit, and *then* when they’ve blown the horns the seventh time, I want everyone to shout as loud as you can.”

“Joshua, you all right? This is nuts.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t come here to do a line dance around the city. I want to fight!”

“God told me once – several times, actually – to be strong and courageous,” Joshua replied. “Which takes more courage? To fight or to trust God? Me, I plan to trust God.”

So they did it. For six days they marched around the city once, and then on the seventh day they did it seven times. And when the priests blew their horns the seventh time on the seventh day, the army of Israel let out a shout that echoed through the desert canyons. As the echoes died, cracks appeared on the walls of the city, cracks that grew wider as dust and pebbles began falling to the ground.

Joshua said, “Remember! No one is to hurt Rahab or her family! Don’t touch the house where there’s a window with a scarlet string!”

Then the walls came tumbling down. Joshua said, “Now, we fight.”