

# ***“Just in Case”***

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***The line between good and evil runs through the middle of me.***

***Joshua 9:1-27***

***October 25, 2018***

***Reliving the past***

It's hard not to see a particular Scripture passage or sermon through the lens of my own personal experiences during a given week. My goal is to teach the Bible, not tell stories about my life, but sometimes they seem very interconnected. This past week included not only private connections with those who are struggling in various ways, but some opportunities for reliving the past, good and bad.

On Monday and Tuesday, I finished narrating the history of Corinth for our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary video next year. The last 25 years, of course, are very personal to me. I relived Linda's and my call to Hickory and the difficult early years when it seemed we would never get traction. About the time things started moving forward for the church, we faced our most difficult years in our relationship to the United Church of Christ.

I finished taping that segment on Tuesday afternoon, and then on Wednesday Pastor Lori Blocker, Pastor Amy Stickler, and I met in Salisbury with the two primary leaders of the Western North Carolina Association of the UCC. The main topic of conversation was why Corinth doesn't give more money to the UCC, and particularly the Association. The conversation was too deep and long to relate in detail, but I said that the congregation's decision to take the UCC out of the budget is connected to some painful memories in the early 2000s –

- The seemingly total disregard for the beliefs and values of more conservative members and churches, including Corinth.
- A conference minister who interrupted a committee meeting at Corinth uninvited, and then, when he was invited to an open meeting of the church, publicly accused me of lying to the congregation about different aspects of the conflict.

- A “support consultation” with the committee overseeing ministry that was conducted like an interrogation. I felt like a criminal in front of my peers.

But the truth is, and I also said this on Wednesday, is that I was at fault as well. Those same years included some of my own worst misbehaviors. I was angry, and I let my anger control my thoughts, words, and actions. I fought hard, and I didn’t always fight fair. I was harsh, I was rude, I was unkind. I tried to control outcomes and to shame others for their misbehavior. I modeled some very poor ways of handling conflict. And, although I don’t know that I’ve ever made this connection until yesterday, those were the years that my weight ballooned to 60 pounds more than it is today, and I was on blood pressure meds.

Of course, those who were on my side validated my misbehavior because “they” deserved it. The same thing happened on the other side as well. “They” were encouraged to fight me because I was on the wrong side and not being nice about it. All this reminds me of the following quote by Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unrooted small corner of evil. (*The Gulag Archipelago*)

That quote summarizes well the ninth chapter of Joshua. If I were to place a subtitle on the chapter, it might be, “We never saw this coming.”

### ***The Gibeonites***

We never saw it coming that the Canaanites have rallied together to oppose the Israelites. Up until now, we have seen only that “their hearts melted in fear” (2:11; 5:1) because the stories of Israel, their God Yahweh, and their leader Joshua have gone viral. The crossing of the Red Sea is still part of the lore, 40 years later, but now there’s been the crossing of the Jordan and at least four decisive military victories ending in complete annihilation: two kingdoms east of the Jordan and two on the west side – Jericho and Ai.

We never saw it coming that the Canaanites would form a coalition. For the first time counterattack instead of waiting to be besieged. They correctly discern that if they simply wait for Israel to attack one city at a time, they will all be defeated.

Also, Israel’s initial failure at Ai showed that the invaders were not invincible. They could be defeated under the right circumstances and strategy. While the Israelites knew they lost the first battle of Ai because of their own presumption and disobedience, the Canaanites believed it was because of fierce resistance and the subsequent Israelite

victory was because they outsmarted their foes. Game on! Who's going to fight harder and smarter the next time?

One of the groups of people the Israelites encountered living in the land before them is known as the Hivites.<sup>1</sup> Little is known for sure about them, and for the purposes of our story it doesn't matter much. What's happening here is like saying Europeans displaced the Cherokee, Catawban, Creek, and Waxhaw Indians from North Carolina. Not all of them lived in precise geographical boundaries.

There were several Hivite cities close together, and one of them was Gibeon. The next thing we didn't see coming is the ruse of the Gibeonites. This story is so appropriate for the Sunday before Halloween. They dress up in costume, looking like impoverished and weary travelers. Their bread is crumbly and moldy, their food sacks are old, their wineskins are dirty, and their clothes and shoes are worn out. Their story is that they came from a long way off to make a treaty because they had heard of the power and success of Israel's God. "We are your servants," they say.

Our first reaction to them might be to condemn them for lying. But nobody questions the morality of deception in war – especially if it's your side doing the deceiving. The whole reason the D-Day invasion worked is because the Allies had the Germans convinced our troops would show up at a different place on a different day. Remember, too, that these people are simply trying to survive. Wouldn't you do what they did if it would save your wives, children, and homes?

I don't think their primary sin is deception, but they are still among the idolatrous nations God had condemned to utter destruction because of their depravity. Yet they acknowledge Yahweh's existence, power, and direction (9,24). At the end of the story, they submit to God and his people: "We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you" (25). The line between good and evil runs through the Gibeonites.

### ***The Israelites***

The next surprise in the story is that the trickery works. Israel is duped. I don't understand. I get why bread would get moldy if you came from a few days' travel, but why would wineskins crack and clothes wear out? And if they did come from a distant land, why do they feel threatened enough by Israel to make a treaty? Finally, why would their treaty proposal include the offer to become "servants" (9:8)? Selling yourself into slavery or servitude seems unnecessary if you live that far away.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hivites" occurs 23 times in the Hebrew Bible, usually in a list of Canaanite groups without further distinction. Judges 3:3 locates them in "the mountains of Lebanon," but that doesn't mean this was the only place they lived. The LXX (Septuagint) sometimes substitutes "Horites" for "Hivites." Egyptians used the word "Horites" for the entire region. Another associated name is "Hurrians," but scholars dispute that connection as well. Hivites lived in Shechem as well (Gen. 34:2; compare Joshua 11:3).

The Israelite leaders do seem a little suspicious in verse 7: “Perhaps you live near us,” and Joshua asks, “Who are you and where do you come from?” The leaders investigate their provisions, but the key verse in the whole passage might be verse 14: “They did not inquire of the LORD.” That’s shocking to me just a couple of chapters after the debacle at Ai when they presumed to know what God would do and how.

We never saw it coming that the Israelites kept the treaty made under false pretenses. Why didn’t they just say, “You lied to us, so our promise to you is not valid. We didn’t make a treaty with Gibeonites or Hivites. We made it with a remote nation.” But they keep their word, now very concerned about God’s wrath falling on them for breaking an oath (20), but not so concerned about violating God’s instruction to them not to make any treaties with the people of Canaan.

I see Solzhenitsyn’s insight into human nature all over Joshua 9. We want God to be on the side of the Israelites, and the narrator only to tell stories favorable to them so that no one will ever say they acted wrongly in their conquest. If Canaanites are mentioned, we want only bad stories about their evil. Couldn’t we have had some notes on how they deserved annihilation because were sacrificing their children to idols?

It’s the Israelites, God’s people, who fail again to seek God, who are naïve and presumptuous. Yet they honorably keep their promise made by a handshake, even under if ratified after a charade. They seem to have compassion on these poor people and respect for their cleverness. The line between good and evil runs through the middle of the Israelites as well.

### ***The Lord***

To me, the biggest surprise in the story is God. We never saw it coming that God wouldn’t tell Joshua and the Israelites to wipe out these lying idolaters. He knows the risk in letting them live to deceive his people down the road.

We never saw it coming that the Israelites aren’t punished. This is the second time the leaders have done the same thing – marched on in a decision without asking for God’s help or direction. For lesser things God had punished them before. Moses didn’t get to go into the Promised Land because he struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock. Shouldn’t Joshua now face some discipline?

Once again, this story is about God. I fear that sometimes when you hear me say that, some of you think, “He’s saying the Bible doesn’t speak to our lives.” Not at all. The story is about God, but knowing God better will change everything for you and me.

This story is about the *mercy* of God. “He will not treat us as our sins deserve,” King David would write later in Psalm 103. He certainly knew. “...or repay us according to our iniquities.” Joshua 9 is about the God who surprises us with mercy when we least expect it.

## ***Just in case***

Joshua 9 is written just in case....

*...just in case you think you have God figured out.* God refuses to be confined to your little box of predictability. To know God is not to forecast him. He disciplines when you expect patience, and shows mercy when you think he will strike judgment. He delays action when you think you've met all the conditions in prayer, and comes through when you've given up. It's not that he's being impulsive or playing games with us. It's that he's being God and reminding us that we're not. Most importantly, he's teaching us that what we need is dependence and release from the need to control. What we need is trust and confidence and peace, not the kind of certainty that only makes us arrogant.

*...just in case you want to presume on God's mercy.* Don't take this passage in isolation. Don't think that just because God showed them mercy he will overlook your intentional disobedience and you'll never have to face the consequences. The chapters before and after this one remind us that while God's anger only lasts a short while, his mercy is there to call us to repentance.

*...just in case you believe you are beyond God's mercy.* On any given Sunday, in any given congregation, there always seem to be those who believe they've sinned too deeply, gone too far, to be forgiven. There is such a thing as going too far, but if you're still asking the question, you haven't. The love of God is so wide and deep and high and long that he never wants you to believe your capacity to sin exceeds his capacity to forgive. That's especially seen in the cross of Jesus Christ. Yes, these Gibeonites were complicit in all the wickedness that caused their surrounding cultures to be displaced or exterminated. But God gave them a chance, let them live. And yes, these Israelites committed the sins of their fathers and grandfathers. But God let them go on.

*...just in case you think I can't relate.* As we discussed this passage in my men's Bible study Thursday morning, I asked them if people see me as a kind of goody-goody who never really did anything bad enough to need forgiveness. I was surprised at the enthusiastic chorus of nods. One guy spoke up and said, "Yeah, we see you like that and we don't want to hear stories about how *you almost one time thought about* smoking a cigarette." (That's so unfair, by the way. I did smoke the cigarette.)

One reason I tell the "straight and narrow" stories is because I don't think we need to buy into the lie that everybody's doing it, that everyone lies and cheats and steals and gossips and holds on to resentments and loves porn in secret and lives a self-centered life of greed and divorces if the marriage gets old and all the other things our culture conveys is "just normal" or at least "human." The New Testament witness is that Christ came to set us free and that the Holy Spirit can and will help us turn from sin to live lives of victory, peace, and joy.

I told you the stories (in brief) today about my own anger because the Bible puts unresolved anger right up there with acts of murder and adultery and idolatry. It doesn't even matter how serious was the sin committed against you. The point is not that we shouldn't get angry – that would be unhuman. It's that we have a responsibility as believers in Jesus not to allow it to descend into hurting others (physically or otherwise), into enduring vindictiveness and resentment. We're not even to let the sun go down on our wrath. Many suns went down on my wrath during that era.

I also deeply believe in the adage attributed to a sixteenth century English martyr named John Bradford: "There but for the grace of God go I." He said those words as he watched criminals being led to the gallows. The older I get, the more I think those words when I encounter someone who is caught in the web of addiction or adultery or whatever it is. I was given a great start in life. Not a perfect start, by any means. My dad and Mom both had their own wounds and struggles, and I was sent to boarding school at about age 7. But I had Christian parents who loved me. I was born the fourth child out of five, a place in the birth order that seems consistent with a compliant personality. The era in which I grew up was more innocent and gave me a work ethic. I've never been so poor that I had to resort to stealing, or so throbbled with pain and suffering that I railed against God for it. How do I know that with a different set of circumstances I wouldn't wind up an unemployed, homeless, friendless drug addict with no one left to care what happened to me? I need God's mercy because the line between good and evil runs through the middle of me.

*...just in case you can't extend mercy.* People ask me why I stay in the UCC when so many do and say things that are against my own beliefs and values, and when I can tell stories of how deeply some have tried to hurt me. Why do I advocate giving and participating actively? Thankfully the situation in the UCC has become much improved in the last decade, with many denominational leaders top to bottom welcoming and encouraging me and others who choose to stay. But the main reason for me is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that has gripped my heart. This is one concrete way I can live out the implications of God's unfathomable mercy on me. Jesus didn't separate from me; he came to me. He took on my own humanity and suffered all the way to the humiliation of the cross. That's God's ultimate expression of mercy.

I'm not suggesting that we need to move on quickly when someone sins against God and against us. I am saying that when I am tempted to think that someone has hurt me so badly I can never forgive, never reconcile, I need to remember that the line between good and evil runs through whoever my "them" is, and it runs through me. I need to remember the mercy of God in Joshua 9, and especially remember Jesus. Amen.