

PENTECOST 2 – June 6, 2010
Joshua 5:13 – 6:5, 20
Pastor Thomas Kneser

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

In our Gospel lesson for today we heard Jesus praise a centurion, a Roman soldier who commanded 100 men, for his faith. When one of his valuable servants became gravely ill this centurion, who had come to learn of and believe in the God of Israel, he sent a delegation to request that Jesus come and heal the servant. As Jesus was on his way the centurion sent another message that Jesus need not trouble himself, that the centurion didn't feel worthy to have the Son of God come under his roof. The soldier was firmly convinced that Jesus had to merely speak the word and his servant would be healed. This foreign convert recognized what many of Jesus' own people failed to see, that Jesus was the powerful Son of God.

That's the nature of a true and living faith. It takes God at his word. It trusts that when God makes a promise he has the love and the desire and the power to make that promise come true. Now, it all depends on the one in whom that faith is placed. People have faith in lots of different things, lots of false gods. If I wanted to, I could put my trust in that piano over there. I could pray to it, place my offerings on it, even convince myself that it had my best interests at heart and that it would give me a blessed and eternal future. But where would such faith get me? Not very far at all, right? A true and living faith will always be focused on the one true God, the one who has a track record, who has displayed his power over and over again, who has shown himself worthy of our trust. The Spirit working through the word convinces us that the God revealed there is that one, true, triune God.

Our OT lesson for today shows that faith will act even when it goes against all odds, even when it seems utterly ridiculous. We are convinced that the Holy Spirit works this conviction in us, just as it did in the centurion, and as was the case for the people of Israel as they stood outside those walls of the city of Jericho, that...

FAITH LIVES ON THE PROMISES OF GOD

We will see how God promised to deliver Jericho to Israel, how the people of Israel acted on this promise, what the results were and how it all applies to us today.

I.

The people of Israel had recently entered the Promised Land after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness after God had powerfully freed them from their slavery in Egypt. The hand of the Lord was with them under the leadership of Joshua, as the Lord stopped the waters of the Jordan River so that the Israelites could cross into Palestine on dry land. They set up their camp, celebrated the Passover and began preparations for inhabiting this country which the Lord had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

The first obstacle was the city of Jericho. It controlled the roads into the highlands to the west. It was THE major city in the Jordan valley, situated alongside some reliable springs of water. It was a fortified city, meaning it was a walled city. Joshua had sent spies into the city to check things out. Those spies had found out that reports about God's mighty miracles had circulated and that the inhabitants of Jericho were living in great fear because it was plain to see that the Lord was doing powerful things on behalf of his people. No one had been able to stand up against him. A woman named Rahab who had hidden the spies in her house had confessed, **Everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.**

So now, as Joshua came near to Jericho to scope things out, he was met by a man standing with a drawn sword who identified himself as commander of the army of the Lord. Who is

this? None other than the Lord himself, the second person of the Trinity who later took on human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. He told Joshua to remove his shoes because this was holy ground, that it was now dedicated to the Lord. This was the place the Lord would once again powerfully display his glory and his favor on the people of Israel. **I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men,** he said to Joshua. The battle was as good as over. God's promise here was that the Israelites would be victorious because God himself was going to hand the city over to them. It wasn't going to be because they had such a great army or because of superior strategy or because of the weakness of the army of Jericho. It was all because of God's power and strength, because of the promises he had made to the Israelites. He was going to display himself once again as the faithful and true God who does everything necessary for his people.

What were the Israelites supposed to do, to show their faith that the Lord would keep his promise to deliver Jericho into their hands? They were to march. With the army at the front, with 7 priests blowing seven ram's horns and leading the Ark of the Covenant in the middle and then with the people bringing up the rear, they were to march around the city of Jericho once a day for six days. Then on the seventh day they were to do the same thing, but not just once around. On that day they were to march around the city seven times. Then when the priests gave a long blast on the horns the people were to shout with all their might and the wall of the city would come tumbling down. The soldiers would then be able to charge straight in and take the city. What a battle plan!

Notice a couple of things. First, the prominence of the number 7, seven priests carrying seven horns, 7 times on the 7th day. In the Bible the number seven is a sacred number denoting perfection and completeness. All these "7s" were to impress on the Israelites that this was not a random occurrence, or that it was because of anything they were doing, other than the marching. It was to show that the Lord was totally in charge here. That was why they carried the Ark of the Covenant in the middle. That was the symbol of the Lord's presence. The Israelites were acting on the basis of their relationship with him, a relationship based on his power and love for them.

II.

When Joshua returned to his people he passed on to the Israelites the instructions the Lord had delivered to him and they began at once to put the Lord's plans into action. On the morning of the first day, they did just as the Lord commanded, marching around the city one time, then returned to their camp. They did exactly the same thing for the next five days. The repetition of this marching around the city was to exercise their complete faith and trust in the Lord, to impress on the Israelites that it was God alone who would deliver the city in their hands.

Then, too, for the people of Jericho, the sight of this daily procession, the sounding of the rams' horns, very likely led many of them to ridicule and show contempt for the Israelites. It must have seemed very silly to those closed up behind the walls of their fortified city.

III.

And then the seventh day came, the day of promised victory. Would God show himself as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, display his favor on his people and his power over their enemies? Was the faith of the Israelites misplaced, or would they see a great victory on the part of the Lord working for his people? On that seventh day they began at dawn, marching around the city seven times. And then, **When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city.** Later in the chapter we are told that they put every living creature to death and burned the city as punishment for its idolatry against the Lord. Israel had kept its faith and the Lord had kept his promise.

Of course there are critics of this account. Some claim that the people of Jericho were cowards, that there must have been some treason or treachery going on in that city. Others im-

agine that the constant trampling around the city weakened the walls or that there had been an earthquake. But there is archeological evidence that things transpired just as Joshua records it for us here. Evidence of has been found at this site of great layers of burned material and wall ruins, of pottery dating from this time period around 1400 BC. The entire discovery is said to reveal that destruction came very suddenly to the people of Jericho. The writer of the letter to Hebrews sums it up by saying, **By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.** Their faith lived on the promises of God.

IV.

What does this powerful miracle mean for you and me, some 3400 years after it took place? It means exactly what it did back then, that faith lives on the promises of God. God had promised Israel that he would give Jericho into their hands. By faith the Israelites marched and shouted and God kept his word. They saw once again that God's power and love for them compelled them to remain faithful and true to him, that every success they enjoyed as a nation was solely because of what God had all done for them, the relationship that he had established and maintained, based on the promises he had made to their forefathers.

Do we face any Jerichos today? Are there seemingly impregnable walls that surround us, that might threaten our peace and security? Of course there! Perhaps you are facing financial issues that are chipping away at your confidence in the Lord, the loss of a job and the hardship that can cause. Maybe it's ongoing medical issues, cancer, arthritis, loss of hearing or eyesight. Those things at times can weaken our trust in the God and his goodness toward us. Or maybe there are relationships in our marriage or family that we know aren't where we would like them to be. How do we handle those things? Where do we find solutions to deal with them, to cope? Is it all up to us, our own abilities and resourcefulness?

The lesson here from the victory at Jericho is that we are to keep trusting in the God who keeps his promises, even in the face of formidable obstacles! Look at the victories he has already won for us! The commander of the Lord's army came as the child of Bethlehem, the man of Nazareth and accomplished all that needed doing in the battle to defeat sin, death, Satan and hell. Jesus Christ took on our spiritual enemies and by his perfect life, his innocent suffering and death and his triumphant resurrection from the grave showed that he is King and Lord and Savior of all mankind. He is God the Son who demonstrated his power and love on our behalf so that we could escape the certainty of hell that our sinfulness should bring upon us. He won the victory, maybe not in as impressive a display as took place at Jericho. He did it humbly, appearing as a man who was beaten and broken and nailed to a tree. But in the glory of the resurrection we see him as the champion. And that's a victory even more meaningful than the one at Jericho. His victory means we gain entrance to the eternal promised land of heaven. We have blessings and joy that will last forever.

And even right here and now, that champion is at work, fighting on our behalf, applying his love and his power to help us through this life. The commander of the Lord's army is on our side as we are led by the Spirit working through the word to put our faith and trust in him. As we go to that word we hear his invitation to call on him in the day of trouble and cherish his promises to deliver us, to give us the strength to bear up under stress and temptation. He may allow suffering and pain to enter our lives, sometimes to a great degree. But as we go to his word and see his promise that nothing in all creation can separate us from his love, we are led to maintain our faith in him, to rely on his promises and to make choices that reflect the fact that we know the ultimate victory is assured. With his help we can and will win those little battles of this life. With the solutions and strength supplied by God's word, we can keep marching on until we reach our eternal home in heaven.

Let us live our lives in faith, learning the lessons from God's word as we have done today, learning that he indeed, has our best interests at heart. We see that he can deliver, that he

has delivered his believers of the past and promised to continue doing so in the future. The final victory is assured. So let those promises of God guide your decision making and keep you coming here to be refreshed and strengthened to face the challenges of life, challenges God can and will conquer on our behalf. AMEN.