

Jennifer Herdt  
Marquand Chapel Sermon  
Friday, September 11, 2015  
Joshua 2:15-24

Here we are, two weeks into the new semester. There's plenty of start-of-term energy still buzzing around and in us, and life is just beginning to settle into a rhythm of classes and sections, of prayer and fellowship, of reading and writing. We are beginning the process of weaving ourselves into a new community, helping our new members learn to name the gifts they have to share, learning to see ourselves, to see Yale Divinity School, anew. It is a wonderful, exciting time.

Of course, to be sure, it is also a time of uncertainty. We compare ourselves with our brothers and sisters, compare our flickering sense of vocation with the steady flames of purpose we see around us, compare our halting contributions to class discussions with the eloquent utterances spouted effortlessly by others, compare our awkward attempts at connection and friendship with the intimacy and belonging enacted around us. And then, too, however fresh our enjoyment of this moment, where the lives of meaning and purpose we imagine for ourselves seem to hang before our eyes like rapidly swelling fruit, there is darkness lurking on the borders of our consciousness. We cannot, even in the midst of our own excitement and happiness and small insecurities, ignore the horror of millions of migrants fleeing from Syria and Iraq and knocking on doors across Europe, asking if there is any room at the inn. We cannot ignore headlines about sharply rising murder rates in American cities—are the same police who profile and target black bodies now withdrawing to let neighborhoods fend for themselves? Is desperation at police

brutality, at a system stacked against black lives, evoking counter-violence? And then there is the fact that today is September 11.

If the average YDS student is 27 (26 for the incoming class), the average 'you' (a myth, I know) was 13 when the events of 9/11 took place—the age my daughter Cora, born just 13 days after 9/11, is right now. In just 13 days, Cora will turn 14—and so I have my own personal reminder of just how many years it has been since 9/11. I don't quite know what it would have been like to be 13 at that time. I know that I was glad that my own first child was still in the womb, still sheltered, blissfully unconscious of all that devastation and horror. In fact, I confess that I wanted to turn it all off so that I could protect her even from my own shock and anguish, as I sought to slow down preterm labor, to keep her in a few more weeks, let her tiny lungs mature. And I pondered what it meant to be bringing new life into a world so shaken and troubled.

I think for all of us it was a time of complex, mixed emotions—the shock of the planes hitting, not one but both towers, of the buildings disappearing into a shroud of smoke, dawning awareness of the horrible drama unfolding within, the growing sense of outrage, of violation. Over the days and weeks and months that followed, there were stunning acts of courage and heroism, sustained enactments of generosity, hope and wonder born anew. But then there were also the pointing fingers, the search for perpetrators, the longing for justice, the burning for revenge. And many of us woke up to see that we had lost not only our sense of invulnerability, but also our sense of innocence. Those planes had punctured not only buildings, but our ever-resilient national illusion, the illusion of being a city on

a hill, a beacon to the nations, proclaiming to all our gospel of freedom. We could, to be sure, hunt down perpetrators to bring them to justice, but we had also to begin a painful reckoning with our complicity in the America targeted in the attacks, the America capable of eliciting such determined hatred, the bully on the playground of the nations, the imperial power of global capitalism—an America seen by many, within and without, as a Christian nation. To be sure, this was not really news, but 9/11 was more difficult for Americans to ignore than the quiet, persistent bleeding of the Three-Fourths world.

Which brings us to Joshua. I have to admit that I would have been tempted to pass over this particular lectionary reading in silence, had I not recently heard Professor Carolyn Sharp preach on another part of the book of Joshua.<sup>1</sup> Professor Sharp happens to be writing a commentary on the book of Joshua. Now that, it seems to me, is rushing in where angels fear to tread. After all, this is a book that glorifies and sanctifies conquest, does it not?—the Hebrew people conquering the Canaanites, wreaking devastation on the people, taking possession of their land, and all at the express command of Yahweh their God. Now this could elicit uncomfortable questions from even the most sleepy Sunday School class! Moreover, our reading for today is such a confusing snippet, intelligible only with the help of considerable scene-setting. The ‘she’ we are talking about here is Rahab the prostitute, Canaanite inhabitant of the city of Jericho. Rahab inexplicably takes in the two spies sent by Joshua, hides them to protect them from the understandably suspicious king of Jericho, offers her own acknowledgment of the greatness of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT, August 16, 2015.

LORD, and begs for protection for herself and her family. This is where today's reading picks up the thread: the spies agree to protect Rahab, but only if she adheres strictly to the requirements they lay out; the spies depart into the hill country, evade capture, and deliver a report to Joshua—a report apparently based not on their own spying skills but wholly on Rahab's words.

What are we to make of this? As so often, it is the marginalized, the outsider, the despised one, who confesses the greatness of God. Those comfortable in their chosenness, in their privileged status, doubt and dither and bargain; the marginalized have faith. The apparently chosen are blind; the outsider is the one who sees. From our own vantage point, with the help of hindsight, we can see that the spies still have a great deal to learn.

Prof. Sharp suggests (at least, if I heard her correctly; she should of course in no way be held responsible for whatever interpretive havoc I am about to wreak) that if we attend carefully to the book of Joshua, we will discover *not* a triumphalist narrative of conquest, but a story of confusion, of shifting boundaries and identities, of lack of clarity about who is enemy and who is friend, insider and outsider, a tangled web the lesson of which is to teach trust in God, not in all-too-human plans and distinctions and sources of pride. This gave me ears to listen anew for God's word in the book of Joshua—and in particular, to hear God's word in Joshua here at YDS on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2015, as we observe the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and as we reflect on the impact around the globe of American policies and of the American way of life.

If we have ears to hear, Joshua punctures our confidence that we are the chosen ones. It leaves us confused, leaves us feeling complicit and unclean. It leads us not to a sense of power and invulnerability, but to a posture of receptivity towards others and trust in God. We are not invulnerable. We are not innocent. We have much to learn from our neighbors, most especially those to whom we find it hardest to listen—those who painfully remind us of our various forms of privilege and complicity.

And so it is that we approach the Lord's table today, bringing with us our start-of-term excitement and optimism, but also the heaviness of the world--our sense that we are called, and also our uncertainty over what difference we can possibly make. We come praying that our hearts may be opened up wide enough to take in all this hurt and outrage and confusion and guilt. We come praying that we be not wombs sealed tightly to protect our own complacency, but capable of celebrating and nurturing new life in the very face of devastation and destruction. And we come praying that the new lives that we are nourishing here at YDS may be fed by attending to the Rahabs in our midst—here, in our cities, and around the world.

Amen