

## “Standing on the Promises”

A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode  
The Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Scripture: Joshua 24:21-28

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, as we hear and think about your word to us today, we pray that you would help us hear what you would have us hear and then live as you would have us live. Amen.*

If you were here last week, you will remember that we talked about God’s command to Joshua to lead the children of Israel to the Promised Land. You will remember, too, that when they arrived in Gilgal, they built a monument of stones, as a reminder of the miracles God had worked in their lives. Each of us, then, as we left the sanctuary, left an “Ebenezer” or stone of help, to remind us and our children that God is always with us, “We are not alone.” Well, this morning, we are going to take a look at the children of Israel after they have been in the Promised Land for a bit.

The book of Joshua is a book of history and vision. While it gives the history of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, it also gives us a glimpse of God’s unfolding revelation for Israel. The underlying theme of this book is found in the character and nature of Joshua as a brilliant leader, but also as a spiritual guide to his people. It is in that spirit that our text for this morning begins to take shape. The Israelites had spent 40 years in the wilderness because of their disobedience to God and their fear of the Canaanites. The estrangement that disobedience brought to them, as it brings to us, was a state of imbalance because they and we tend not to trust our own judgment or God’s leading in our lives.

When God promised to deliver the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, he also promised them a new homeland – a plot of ground which they could call their own – a good, fair land flowing with milk and honey. And

then, after reminding the Israelites of his covenant with them, God not only restored them, but he also demonstrated that no longer would they have to rely on manna but as a part of his promise they would now reap provisions from the land.

The phrase, “The Promised Land,” has mythic proportions in our society. America was hailed as the Promised Land for thousand of immigrants seeking escape from grinding poverty. For former Southern slaves, the North was viewed as the Promised Land, where racism did not lurk and lynch. For people hoping to build a better life, the American frontier was often described as a promised land.

Many songs use the imagery to describe the longing for a way out of dead-end lives or oppressive realities. The hymn, “I am Bound for the Promised Land,” links that land to heaven:

“O’er all those wide, extended plains,  
Shines one eternal day;  
There God the Son forever reigns,  
And scatters night away.”

Even rock-and-roll legend Bruce Springsteen has a song entitled, “The Promised Land,” in which the singer longs for something better.

For ancient Israel, the Promised Land represented many things as well – a land of milk and honey, where food was abundant, a land of safety from enemies and rest from wandering. It was to be a “holy” land, made holy by a people who were faithful to God’s will and intention for human life.

The Holy Land was made holy by the society constructed by the people of God, to which each person contributed. We tend to think of a holy person as someone like Mother Teresa. But the Bible is clear that ordinary people and ordinary actions can be holy. The word “holy”

means to be “set apart or dedicated to God.” Holiness was, and is, a way of living daily life.

And that holy, promised land was to be a “one God” culture in a multiple-god world. Sabbath keeping and honoring parents were commanded. Murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting were prohibited. Special attention was to be paid to the poor, widow, orphan and resident alien. Care for those who were most vulnerable, ethical business transactions, and justice in the courts were to mark its life together.

While the crossing of the River Jordan into the Promised Land has become an image for the experience of crossing over the river of death into the safe haven of heaven, in reality, for the Israelites, the Promised Land was no paradise. Rather than being a land flowing with milk and honey, Palestine was a bare and poverty stricken country. It was a country of contrasts. The land was scarred by deep gorges and desolate wilderness. In many places, colossal erupted masses of volcanic rock provided the only shade; and, sources of water were scarce. Here and there, an oasis or a plateau appeared where various forms of vegetation thrived. The Promised Land was certainly not the lush garden of Eden that we commonly associate with heaven.

Moreover, to imply that God gave to the Israelites the gift of the Promised Land, neatly gift-wrapped and topped with a big bow, is far from the truth. The gift of the Promised Land was more like a child’s toy which must be laboriously assembled – following confusing directions – attaching piece A to side C – with a special tool – which does not come in the kit! I know you all know what I’m talking about!

When the Israelites arrived in Canaan, it was already occupied by warring rulers, fortified cities, and belligerent inhabitants. The Promised Land was not a Utopia to be enjoyed. It was a pagan country to be conquered. It was not a gift

so much as it was a conquest. If the land was to be theirs, the Israelites would have to work for it and fight for it. And so, they did.

It took many generations – probably two-hundred years – of victories and defeats, successes, and setbacks – before the Promised Land could be fully occupied by the Israelites. And even when Israel had formed a nation in the Promised Land, it was still no paradise. Sandwiched in between major world powers, Israel continually had to fight to secure her rights to the land. Again and again, the Israelites were captured by their enemies, enslaved, and driven from their land. Again and again, Israel made an exodus from exile and returned to the homeland to rebuild the nation. The whole history of Israel is the story of persecution and enslavement, exile and exodus, defeat and deliverance.

Regardless of what was going on in their lives, though, they never surrendered their belief in the one, holy, and transcendent God. There were times when they argued with God. There were times when they challenged him with the complaints. There were times when they disobeyed him. There were times when they hardened their hearts against him, and turned away from him. There were even times when they openly rebelled against him, and they cursed his blessings. Even with all of those things, though, they never really disbelieved in him.

The secret of Israel's survival is that they not only believed in almighty God who could do the impossible; they also constantly remembered and celebrated God's mighty acts in history. The people of Israel never forgot the impossible things that God had done for them. When it appeared that God was doing nothing, the people of Israel remembered and celebrated the events of their past – when God had done everything. To endure and to survive, Israel stood steadfast in God's promises in the present while celebrating God's actions in the past.

The secret of Israel's survival is that their God was not a prisoner in this world. Their God was a living, transcendent God. Because he was the Lord over all other gods, he could use nature and history to serve his purpose for his people. The secret of Israel's survival was the strength that they received from God, together with their unswerving belief that their God could do the impossible.

Is your God the God of Gilgal – the God who can roll away the Red Seas of this world and set people free? Is your God big enough to roll away the waters of the Jordan and to deliver believers into the Promised Land of eternal life? Is your God big enough to work miracles and to perform marvelous and mighty acts? If your God is not that big, then, he is not the God of the Israelites – nor is he the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joshua.

How big is your God? Is he the Lord over all of history? Does he hold the whole world in his hand? Or, is your God so small that he is confined to the church? Is your God so small that he can be contained in the limitations of a creed – or the description of a doctrine? Or, is your God big enough to stand in judgment over the politics of all nations? Is your God big enough to move you to fight poverty and privation? Is your God big enough to strengthen you to stand up against injustice and intolerance? Is your God big enough to empower you to serve and to sacrifice and to share your time, your talents and your treasures willingly with others? Either your God is Lord of all, or he is not Lord at all!

“And when the Israelites considered this question, the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord!” May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to: Mary Mikhael, et al, for the 2009-2010 Horizons Bible Study, “Joshua, A Journey of Faith”, King Duncan for his sermon, “Taking Charge”, Rodney Thomas Smothe for his sermon, “Following*

*God's Lead”, Carl Hoefler for his sermon, “The Secret of Survival”, Won Hur for his comments in the May/June 2009 edition of “The Clergy Journal” the “The Interpreters’ Commentary” and Rosalind Bamberg for her article “The Land of Promise or The Promised Land” in the November 9, 2009 issue of The Presbyterian Outlook.*

“Standing on the Promises”  
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode  
The Thirty-Second Sunday  
in Ordinary Time  
Scripture: Joshua 24:21-28



The First Presbyterian Church  
of Dunedin  
455 Scotland Street  
Dunedin, Florida 34698  
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297  
WEBSITE: [fpcdunedin.org](http://fpcdunedin.org)  
E-mail:  
[officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com)  
Victoria ByRode, Pastor