Almost every Sunday morning, I post an invitation on Lakeside’s Facebook page about what will be happening here that morning and inviting folks to come. Today’s post, of course was about the Rite of Confirmation and our Bible focus: the book of Joshua.

Not long after posting, I got a Facebook message back from Pastor David Allman, a seminary classmate who happens to be my mother-in-law’s pastor in Sun City Center, Florida. Here’s what he wrote:

“So, you are talking about Joshua today? Are you going to talk about war, destruction, and genocide? (Smiley Face)”

It’s not exactly the topic you’d expect on a confirmation Sunday.

Now if you are going to talk about Joshua, you need to be prepared to tackle some difficult things. My friend, Pastor David, is right. Joshua is a bloody book. A violent book.

The book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest of the holy land under the leadership of Joshua, Moses’ successor. It tells a story of a (air quotes) “holy war” that Israel waged against the nations then occupying the land that God had promised to Abraham.

Let’s look at the most familiar story in Joshua, the story of the conquest of Jericho – as in “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls come a-tumbalin’ down.”

This is the story in which Joshua sent spies to learn everything they can about the lay of the land in Jericho, as well as the mindset of the people there. The king of Jericho heard that Joshua’s spies were in town, but a prostitute named Rahab hid
the spies in her home, built right into Jericho’s city wall. In exchange for her cooperation, the spies promised that when Joshua’s armies invaded, she and all in her household would be spared.

You’ll never hear a military strategy as odd as the one God commanded Joshua to use. Listen:

**Joshua 6:3-5 (NIV 2011)**

3 March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. 4 Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. 5 When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.”

Every once in a while, God does something so humanly impossible that there can be no mistaking that the event is a God-thing. The parting of the Sea. Ninety-year olds and virgins giving birth. Manna falling from the sky. Marching around Jericho, blowing trumpets and shouting are not the usual way to bring down a fortified wall. That was a God thing.

What things have happened in your life that were so impossible that they had to be God things? I’ll bet there are some!

Joshua also gave orders as to what his army should do once the walls came down:

**Joshua 6:17 (NIV2011)**

17 The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent.
Joshua also ordered that no one was to take the gold and silver they captured for themselves. If anyone disobeyed that order, it would cause the destruction of the Israelites’ camp.

Joshua’s army followed its orders to a T. It made sure Rahab and her household were safely out of Jericho, then it killed every living thing. No soldier took any gold or silver for himself. It all went into the Treasury of the Lord.

The battle of Jericho offers an example of the rules of holy war.

1. Take no prisoners. Kill everyone.
2. Take no plunder. The spoils of war belong to God.

According to the book of Joshua, whenever the armies under Joshua followed these rules, conquests came easily. And when someone decided to disobey these rules of holy war, the next battle would not go so well for Israel.

Pastor David had it right: Joshua is about war, destruction and genocide.

Serious Christians need to think hard about that. With your confirmation today, Juli and Jason, the church is now saying that you both are among the ranks of serious Christians.

So I hope questions like these questions come to mind: What does the book of Joshua say about God? Does God really order the slaughter of anybody?

1900 years ago, a fellow named Marcion was probably the first to come to that conclusion. Because of Joshua and books like it, Marcion concluded that the God of the Old Testament was a different, inferior God, to the God who was the Father of Jesus.

And since Marcion believed that Old Testament God was an inferior God, he thought that the entire Old Testament should be
removed from the Bible. Thomas Jefferson proposed the same thing in his day.

Martin Luther did not advocate removing the Old Testament from the Bible, but he did make value judgments about Scripture. For him, the primary question about any Bible passage was this: did it carry Christ to those who heard?

To illustrate this principle of Biblical interpretation, Luther gave this homespun illustration:

“The Bible is the manger in which the Christ child is laid.”

Just like there’s a lot of straw in a manger, there’s a lot of straw in the Bible. You might remember that Luther called the New Testament letter of James an epistle of straw.

It seems to me that there is a lot of straw in the book of Joshua as well. Right now, I just can’t believe that the one God, the God of love, would order the mass killings of entire cities and countries. It’s hard for me to find much good news among all the human carnage and rubble.

But make no mistake, there is good news!

Just as God brought down the wall by trumpet sounds and shouts, so God does the seemingly impossible in our lives. God promised land to Abraham, and that Abraham would become a great nation. The book of Joshua tells the story of the fulfillment of that promise, straw and all.

And what can we say about Jesus in light of the story of Joshua? Maybe this: In Jesus, God becomes vulnerable to a war that his enemies certainly thought was holy. Both the religious authorities and the Roman Government believed that they were defending God when together, they brought down the maximum wrath possible on Jesus head.
But the wrath of human authorities, as the writer of Ephesians said, was precisely what Jesus used to break down every dividing wall that separates human beings from one another, beginning with Jews and Gentiles.

Jesus’ victory was won not by killing his enemies, but by dying at their hands and in so doing, pouring his love into the world. At Easter, we learn that what looked like a defeat was, and is, really a victory.

Good Friday through Easter Sunday was when the ultimate Holy War was fought. God won by losing, and we get to claim the ultimate plunder: life with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit now and forever.

Amen