

## God's Gift 500 Years Later

Regretfully, I must say that I cannot offer a written copy of this sermon. Unless, of course, it would suffice to let the sermon happen again, in another place, in another time, in another format. The sermon that happened at TUMC on Sept. 15th was already a "copy" of the sermon I preached at Danforth one week earlier.

But at Danforth I did not tell the story of how, as a 12 year-old, I accidentally broke my Christmas gift, a wooden chess set, a half hour after I opened it. I wanted to illustrate how the children of Israel violated the "gift" of the promised land just as soon as they entered it. God had given the land to the people, and promised that "no one shall be able to stand against you" as they took the land. But they had barely entered the land, and already, they had miserably forgotten to follow the instruction (torah) of God, and they lost the battle for the town of Ai (Joshua 7).

At Danforth I also did not tell the story of the chess set that I got about 25 years later. This chess set did not have a wooden box to hold the pieces, but had a vinyl "board" that was pliable. But very keenly I remembered the day the first chess set broke, due to my own inattention.

At TUMC I made the point that when the story of Joshua was written, the people of Israel were about to receive the "gift" of land a second time. They were a broken people, exiled, sitting in Babylon. Their kingdom had had such potential under David, but it split, was conquered, and eventually exiled. Now, after a long time in exile, after seventy years of trying to figure out what it meant to follow the instruction (torah) of God without any temple, king, or land, NOW they suddenly got news that they could go back to Jerusalem. The land was being given to them again, after 500 years.

At TUMC I did "copy" a point I had made at Danforth a week earlier, namely, that the story of God's encouragement to Joshua sounded a lot different five hundred years later. The story begins with God reminding Joshua to "meditate" on "the book of the law day and night."

At both Danforth and TUMC, I encouraged the congregations to meditate on God's teaching, and to imagine, and re-imagine their own identity (identities) as people of God. At Danforth I used the image of the now burnt St. Jacob's market. At TUMC I used the story of the Russian Mennonites coming to Manitoba, and their "broken" genealogies.

Today, we are reading the Joshua story not 500, but 2500 years after it took place. God's encouragement, however, remains to us, "be strong and of good courage" as we face the challenges of following God's torah (instruction) in a world with many peoples, and many "gods."

At both Danforth and TUMC, I concluded with Jesus words about another gift of "land," namely, his teaching that it is the meek who will inherit the earth. (But at TUMC I forgot to remind the people that for readers of New Testament Greek there is no difference between the name "Joshua" and the name "Jesus.")

The story of Joshua offers a new challenge every time we read it. So, Mike, in response to your request for a "copy" of the sermon, here it is, again, five days later, in a different time, a different place, and in email format.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14 NRS)

God bless.