

## **Resident Aliens/Peace Sunday – Nov 9, 2014**

### **Joshua 1 by Patty Friesen**

I missed everyone last Sunday. I still enjoy worshipping at Nutana Park where my husband pastors but Osler sings better and has a better bulletin and a better sanctuary. Nutana doesn't even have a newsletter. There are lots of things Osler does better than Nutana but Patrick says it's not a competition☺

These past weeks have taken us through the Old Testament. N. T. Wright says the Old Testament is like the bass line in music. It is the deep dark under tone holding the harmony together of a Creator God working within a people to set the world right. While I've ended up on the wrong lectionary, using something I got off the internet, the Old Testament bass line scriptures these past weeks have been strikingly relevant. Psalm 23 gave us a framework for our personal walk with The Good Shepherd. The Israelites' in-between journey from Egypt to the Promised Land in Exodus parallels our own in-between interim journey. Moses' death in Deuteronomy gave us some guidance for how to trust our national insecurity to God. What does the conqueror Joshua have to say to us on Peace Sunday?

Joshua does not show up in the normal lectionary for good reason because as the New Interpreter's Commentary says, "much about the book

of Joshua is repulsive, starting with ethnic cleansing and the savage dispossession and genocide of native peoples and the massacre of women and children – all ordered by God. People who regard themselves as peaceable Christians tend to shun the book of Joshua as not simply unedifying but irreconcilable with their faith.” Oh dear. The commentary goes on to say the purpose of a careful study of the book of Joshua is to understand it better and in order to understand it better, we need to look at it’s complicated historical context.

It is possible but unlikely that Joshua happened exactly as recorded. It is comprised of diverse ingredients such as speeches, folk narratives, and religious rituals, believed to have been comprised gradually during the time of the Israelite kings. Archeology is having a hard time finding evidence of Joshua’s massive blitzkrieg of tribes living in Palestine during the Early Iron Age. Most scholars think the tribes of Israel were not actually outsiders, but had been gradually mixed in over generations as residents of the land. It is believed that Joshua was written during the time of David as David himself desired to re-conquer three cities mentioned in Joshua’s conquest, Gilgal, Bethel, and Gibeon. David writes in Joshua that God gave these cities to Israel in the first place, which justifies their re-conquest by him decades later.

King Josiah, whose name shares roots with Joshua also created reform in those same cities, tearing down their pagan religious sites and creating worship for Yahweh. This idea of the Israelite kings writing the history of Joshua to serve their own purposes should not be shocking. It still happens today but I'm intrigued by this notion that the Israelites were not actually a conquering nation but an assimilated collection of tribes whose kings were trying to find a way to make them distinct among the tribes around them. Above all, God worked through these kingly purposes to create a people distinct and loyal to God, not only to the king. In this respect, the Israelites at the time of Joshua were coming into the Promised Land and establishing themselves not as conquering heroes and colonists but resident aliens – people living in the land but different in culture and religion from those around them.

I was a resident alien of the United States. Though I lived and worked there for 20 years and married a citizen, I never became a citizen. I didn't have the right to vote, and carried an immigration card stating I was a resident alien, living there but alien, not a citizen. It always felt like I was from outer space. This idea of living in a land but not really belonging to it is the key identity of how we understand the Israelites in the Promised Land. Resident aliens are how our Mennonite ancestors understood themselves in

Russia – living in the land but speaking a different language – German and worshipping in the Anabaptist tradition, not Russian Orthodox tradition.

Resident aliens are how Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tried to help Christians living in the United States understand themselves in the 1980's when Christianity seemed to be so infused and defined by US politics. Both Right and Left Christians had lost their prophetic voice. Resident Aliens rocked evangelical seminaries and universities around the US with the notion that being American and being Christian was not necessarily the same thing. They proposed that Christians come out of popular and political culture and form an identity around Jesus and his presidency and how his call to preach good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners and release for the oppressed.

This was new and explosive for most evangelical Christians at the time. We Mennonites of course had already heard John Howard Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus* describe this alternative Christian identity in the 1970's and we had long had the identity of being resident aliens, not only in Russia but in North America as well. We were a part of North American culture, yet separate in our religious tradition, values and biblical interpretations around simplicity and pacifism. We had long felt not quite at home, a little different, a little weird. Now suddenly Hauerwas and Willimon said

Mennonites were cool, that we really knew how to be resident alien Christians, living out our faith based on the Sermon on the Mount values not worldly values.

Twenty-five years after *Resident Aliens* was published, it is being heralded as a turning point in evangelical Christianity, focusing on helping Christians not to be assimilated to popular, political culture but to be alien to it. Now theologians are looking at the residency part of resident aliens.

Maybe Christians need to be less alien and more resident in our neighbourhoods, intentionally reaching beyond our church walls and finding out what we have in common with our neighbours. This is a big shift for we Mennonites who may have become not only distinct from the world, but withdrawn from it as well. We are still cool but we may need to stretch our comfort zones of engagement a little bit.

Maybe now is the time for a different image than resident alien. Maybe it is time for us to see ourselves as resident Christians, as resident parents – parents who hold different values from the world, resident artists, resident farmers and teachers, resident doctors and nurses. We are doing our residency, our distinct Christian training, right within our life's calling, right within whatever we happening to be doing every day. I love hearing how people are living out their faith in their parenting and volunteering and

workplaces. Home and work is where church happens in the 106 hours we are not actually in this building. Home and work are where we are dwelling and serving Christ in our daily lives.

If the Old Testament is the bass line, the deep down story of God's love and working through a rebellious people, then Christ is melody, the soprano line that rises high above the bass line, giving it clarity and direction. The name Jesus in Hebrew is Yeshua, or Joshua, meaning Yahweh delivers. The beginning of Jesus' ministry on the banks of the Jordan River sounds a lot like Joshua's commissioning on the banks of the Jordan River with God's words, I am pleased with you. I will never leave you or forsake you. Jesus is the new Joshua who changes the history of God's people, calling us to engage people instead of conquering them.

Jesus is the melody line above the Old Testament bass. The tenor line is the world's song, pressing against the solid bass of God's story and Jesus' melody. When we study the scripture, Old and New Testaments, we hear them in the context of the world's tenor. Finally the alto line is our personal song line is the alto line as it moves between the tenor call of the world and the soprano call of Jesus. Next week we'll look at the four part harmony of Psalm 90, God dwelling with us in Christ and in our hearts, homes, and neighbourhoods. Let's pray...