

Joshua 7:16-26
First Sunday In Lent
Worship the Lord Your God

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I think it would be beneficial this morning to back up and provide some context for today's sermon text from Joshua. Forty years have passed since the children of Israel rebelled against God, refusing to take possession of the Promised Land. Everyone who was twenty years of age or older at the time of that rebellion had died. All but Moses, that is who gathered the people along the banks of the Jordan River as they prepared to cross into the Promised Land. That's where the book of Deuteronomy comes in. It's a series of sermons which Moses delivered to the people just before they started taking possession of the land, a reminder of everything that the LORD had done for them and all that He had commanded them. When he had finished speaking and recording those things, he climbed a nearby mountain, God showed him the land, and then He died, and Joshua became the leader of God's people.

When Joshua led the people into the land, the first city they came to was a highly fortified city called Jericho. Most of you probably know how the LORD miraculously razed that city of Jericho to the ground—at the blast of the priests' trumpets and the shout of the people after marching in circles around the city "the walls came a tumblin' down." God had some important instructions for the Israelites regarding the destruction of Jericho. He had told them, **the city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD** (Joshua 6:17). The word translated "devoted" in that verse is a very special term. Joshua used it to refer to things, people, or cities that were to be set apart to God for destruction. Usually it was for things or people who were impeding or resisting God's work. For example, the wicked people living in the land of Canaan.

In Deuteronomy, during that "pep talk" Moses gave before the people went into the Promised Land He reminded them: **do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you.** The Canaanites were evil, their worship practices included child sacrifice and prostitution. God wanted there to be no trace left of these evil people or their evil ways in the land He was sending His people to possess.

So the people **devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys** (Joshua 6:21). **Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house** (Joshua 6:24). And then they turned their sights on the nearby city of Ai.

But when they went to attack Ai, they were routed, and about 36 Israelites died. When Joshua inquired of the LORD as to why they had been defeated, God told him that Israel had sinned. They had taken some of the devoted things for themselves. **I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction**, the Lord said (Joshua 7:12). In the morning, God instructed, the people must be called together and the guilty party sought out. Then he must be put to death.

That brings us to our text:

¹⁶ Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was chosen. ¹⁷ The clans of Judah came forward, and the Zerahites were chosen. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was chosen. ¹⁸ Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was chosen.

¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

²⁰ Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³ They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

²⁴ Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.”

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶ Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ^[trouble] ever since.

Wow! The harshness and severity of the punishment Achan received underscores for us God’s seriousness when it comes to obedience of His Word. And now I want you to consider something. How different are you and I from Achan? Can you put yourself in his shoes and imagine the thoughts that had gone through his head? First, the thoughts that day when he took the plunder: seems like such a waste for none of us to benefit from any of these spoils... no one is going to notice if I just wrap a bit of silver and gold up in this robe and tuck it away in my cloak... I’m sure there are hundreds of other people doing the exact same thing.

And then imagine the thoughts that morning as Joshua read of the names. Maybe he hoped there was still a chance he wouldn’t be discovered, but as he heard the name of his tribe and then his clan and his family called out you can almost feel his quickening of his pulse and the sinking of his stomach. We can empathize with Achan because we’ve been there. We too have sinned against God. There are things in our lives—sinful urges and desires, wicked habits, and evil attitudes—that God has commanded us to set aside for destruction. Consider these passages from the New Testament: **If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live** (Romans 8:13). **Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry** (Colossians 3:5).

When we don’t put the sin in our lives to death we are as guilty as Achan. And we are as guilty as Achan, because each of us here has on countless occasions fallen into temptation just as he did. In his confession, Achan lays out four steps of temptation which I think we’re well familiar with. First, he confesses I *saw* the gold, the silver, and the robe. So often that glimpse is all it takes to set things into motion. When something is forbidden we do best to avoid looking at it in the first place, and if that isn’t possible then at least not to allow our eyes to linger. There’s a passage I’m fond of from Job, where he says, **I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman** (Job 31:1). You and I need to make covenants with our eyes not to look at that which God has forbidden, covenants with

our ears not listen to that which is evil, with our lips and our tongues not to speak in ways that are hurtful or wicked, and so on... We need to make a covenant with our heart—a covenant with God—to worship the Lord our God and serve Him only.

When we don't have that covenant in mind—when, for example, we allow our eyes to linger where they shouldn't—then we begin *contemplating*. When you heard me read **two hundred shekels of silver** and a **bar of gold weighing fifty shekels** you probably started wondering “How much is that? What would it be worth?” No doubt as Achan looked at it he began asking the same questions and then considering how nice it would be to have that much worth of gold and silver.

Contemplating the “pros” led to him *coveting* the forbidden items and then finally *taking* them. You're confronted with the temptation, you listen as Satan fills your mind with lies about the benefits of the action, you decide you want to do it, and then you act. It's an unfortunately familiar process for sinners like you and me.

What isn't as familiar are the consequences. Stoned to death and burned over a few hundred bucks and a fancy robe? It seems overly harsh, doesn't it? If it does, then that's precisely why we need to hear the story of Achan, or the people of Jericho, or the generation of Israelites who perished in the wilderness. If we're shocked by the severity of God's punishment for sin that we often see so clearly in the Old Testament, it's likely because we do not view sin as seriously as we ought to—we don't share God's alarm over sin.

The real reason we'd like to think that Achan's punishment was overly harsh is that we do not like to entertain that we deserve just as harsh of treatment for our own sin. But we do, and because we are sinful we, like Achan, will die.

That's the lesson from Joshua 7 and it's one we sorely need to hear, we have to be confronted with the seriousness of our sins. We had two other lessons this morning though and I'd like to point to them before I say “Amen.”

In our Gospel lesson, we heard about the temptation of Jesus (Luke 4:1-13). Like Job, Jesus had made a covenant with His eyes, really a covenant with His heart. When He was confronted with temptation He didn't allow His eyes or His mind to linger but instead turned immediately to God's Word. There's a lesson for us there. In battling temptation is isn't enough simply to turn our eyes away, turn the radio off, or leave the room or conversation, we need to have something better, more wholesome, more beautiful to turn our hearts and minds to. What we have is God's love for us in Christ. His loving will for us revealed in the law and in the gospel.

As we heard in our lesson from Hebrews, we have a Savior who **has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin** (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus clothed you in that righteous perfection of His when He took you as His bride, marrying you to Himself at your Baptism. He bore the awful wrath of God for your sins on the cross. So as we heard in that lesson from Hebrews, **Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need** (Hebrews 4:16).

We are sinners and that is serious. Because of our sins we will one day die if the Day of Lord does not come first. But we are also saints who have been sanctified by God through His Son so that we are set aside now not for destruction but for glory. We can confess our sins before God—digging up whatever forbidden thoughts, words, and actions we've buried away and laying them at the cross—and we can find peace and confidence in the gospel that when Christ rose victorious from the tomb our sins remained buried there forever. Amen.