

# The Downsides of Certainty

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-26

By

Dr. Lisa Lamb

Interim Director of Christian Education

November 6, 2011

San Marino Community Church

1750 Virginia Road

San Marino, CA 91108

(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185

*www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com*

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Let me just say at the outset that I did not initially choose this text....The Lectionary offers us this morning a harsh word indeed! This kind of tirade can get a pastor fired. It certainly doesn't seem fitting to a covenant ceremony, which ought to be marked by celebration. The closest link we have today to covenant ceremonies is a wedding. So, picture a wedding scene. You're a happy guest, up near the front. The candles are glowing; the scent of stephanotis fills the air. The couple stares serenely into each other's eyes as the familiar questions are asked, "Will you take this one as your lawfully wedded husband, or wife, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others?" one by one they say, sweetly and sincerely, "I will..." only to hear the minister shout, "You will not! You cannot! You are constitutionally incapable of keeping this vow! You might as well sit down and throw in the towel right now." Desperate to salvage the moment, we would frantically scan the congregation for another minister, someone a bit more pastoral.

In some circles of church work, the word 'pastoral' is used almost as a defensive weapon. Say anything a little too bluntly or directly, and some will leap to say, "I don't feel like you're being pastoral." But it does seem a fair charge to level at Joshua here. After all, here the people have just affirmed their desire and intention to keep God's covenant, in the sincerest of tones, and instead of affirming them, Joshua rebukes them. If we really look at the stories of Scripture, few of the best leaders there would pass the pastoral test. Jeremiah, Amos, Jesus — they were blunt people, passionate and clear. Joshua certainly is not at his most pastoral here. No one would walk away glowing about the warm, pastoral tone of this little diatribe from the mouth of Joshua. The people have come to be joined as if in holy matrimony to their God, in a beautiful celebration of the covenant and, like a renegade acolyte, he snuffs out the candles and utterly wrecks the mood. We don't want leaders like this in our lives — but they may in fact be just the kind of leaders we need.

It all depends on whether we share in the tendencies that Joshua names in the Israelite people. Let me paint you a portrait of the Israelites as they emerge here, and I will let

you decide if it's a portrait to admire from a distance, or a mirror worth keeping close. First, the Israelites are *highly certain* of their own ability to keep this covenant. "Far be it from us," they say, to wander toward other gods. Their perception is of themselves as sincere, upstanding people, well-groomed and well-meaning. And they will brook no challenges to that image; it must be maintained. Far be it from us. If there is any tendency toward idolatry within them, they seem to have a lot invested in holding it at a distance.

Kathryn Schultz, in her fascinating book, *Being Wrong*, describes a simple study that child development psychologists do with two and a half-year olds, looking at their cognitive and moral development. Show many of them a box with candy on the cover. Ask them, "What do you think is inside?" They will say, not surprisingly, "Candy." Open the box and slide out pencils, and they will say, with some disappointment, "Oh, pencils." Wait just a few seconds and then ask them, "What did you think was in the box before I showed you?" They will say, "Pencils."<sup>1</sup>

They aren't lying to you. It's just that at this point in their development their perceptions are reality. They simply don't have the moral sophistication to reflect on their capacity to be wrong. It's cute in kids; it's a bit more troubling in adults. A friend said he knew he was in trouble at his workplace when his new boss said, "You are free to challenge my actions, but never my motives. I am always on your side, 100%." At first that sounds great — who wouldn't want a boss who was always on your side with the purest of motives? But there was a blindness there to his own human nature and fallibility that did not bode well, and sure enough, the arrogant and narcissistic tendencies in this boss bled through pretty quickly. Far better for us to say to each other, "You are free to challenge me on . . . everything! I'm shot through with inconsistencies. I've got a mean streak a mile long, and I'll doubt God's faithfulness five times before breakfast."

I wonder how this scene would have unfolded if they had replied, "Well, Joshua, we'll certainly try to keep this covenant. But... we'll probably fail. We're just not that good at this. It doesn't come naturally to us. What comes naturally to us is idolatry. Prone to wander, Lord we feel it. That's what our ancestors did, and it's bred into our bones.

---

<sup>1</sup> Schultz, Katherine *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, Ecco Publishing, January 4, 2011 (Reprint)

And it's what we see in the nations all around us. We're tempted by what we see, we'll admit it. Near is it to us. Do you have any suggestions for us?" I'm pretty sure we would have seen a different side of Joshua's leadership. Maybe even a pastoral one.

Second, in addition to their misplaced self-certainty, they are indeed prone to idolatry. The tragic irony in their certainty about their ability to keep the covenant is revealed just two chapters later in Judges, when the people are bowing down in droves to Baal and Astartes. Fortunately we don't have idols today; we don't have Amorite neighbors selling us little amulets and telling us they can grant us greater fertility or victory in battle.

Or do we? What are our idols today? As one writer puts it, "Idols are gods that are too small to handle life. They are narrowed to their own little worlds and tend to narrow the world of their worshippers."<sup>2</sup> In my own life the simple definition of idolatry that I first heard from Daniel Fuller, the son of the founder of Fuller Seminary, has served as a litmus test for many years. It is this: "Idolatry is pinning your hopes for a happy future on anything other than the living God." Well, I do that all the time. . . pinning my hopes on effort, style, and if I'm honest, something vague that I'll call good luck. And I'm inevitably disappointed. The nature of idols is that they overpromise but ultimately always under-deliver. Instead of giving they demand more from us: more time, more devotion, and more allegiance. They drain life from us as we fixate upon them.

Our text this morning describes three types of idolatries to which the Israelites fall prey. The first is the gods of the time of their innocence, the ancient gods their ancestors worshipped beyond the river, before God had revealed himself to Abraham. These are akin for us to the family scripts that we have passed down and inherited from generation to generation. "We McColls, we don't look to anyone else for help. We Wongs, we always bring honor to the family name by excelling at all costs." When life in the new Land of Promise gets tough, we cast our eyes back across the river to those familiar grooves, those myths that seemed to work in the past. "I'll just work a little harder. That's it. That's what my family has always done. I'll grunt it out, gut it out, and somehow I'll come out on top again." We revert to familiar narratives, rather than turn to the living God, the God of hope who is ever writing new stories for us.

---

<sup>2</sup> Wigger, Bradley, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace*, Jossey-Bass; 1 edition (January 22, 2003)

Joshua also names the idols their more recent ancestors turned to, idols they found in Egypt, in the time of captivity and suffering. Our seasons of suffering *may* turn us toward God, but sadly too often when we find ourselves in Egypt we lean into sources of comfort more tangible and immediate than God. When we are licking our wounds after a crushing defeat in business or a relationship, we tend to look around for a quick fix rather than a long obedience in a slow direction. Sometimes we'll settle for almost anything, from a safer investment strategy to, my personal favorite — a really good piece of chocolate. It's hard to keep hoping in a God we cannot see while we find ourselves in the land of sorrows.

The third type of idolatry is the most current. It's the gods of the Amorites, in whose land they are now living. This is the water we swim in; this is the air we breathe. These gods are the latest thing — the latest technology, the latest sure-fire strategy. Though God had driven them out for now, historically the Amorites were fierce warriors who bred war horses that practically guaranteed them success in battle — it was the high-tech of the time. The Amorites today are the media, the right technology, and they are sometimes our own neighbors, enticing us to trust and hope in the latest tutoring package that will virtually guarantee the best college acceptance for our kids. Don't get me wrong — there is nothing wrong with getting tutors for our kids, as long as when we do, we know deeply that their future is secure in the hands of God. It's hard to drown out the voices of the Amorites, since we are prone to the very same fears that have led them to choose cheap solutions and to chase false promises. So Joshua says, "You will need to choose. And it won't be easy."

It turns out, Joshua is just the kind of leader we need in our lives. If you have a friend like this in your life, be grateful. Welcome their words; look in the mirror they place before you. Joshua is pursuing a strategy here to help them break through the fog of denial about the idolatry of which they are capable. Before even saying a word, I suspect that one of his cleverest strategies was to locate this covenant ceremony at Shechem. The obvious location would have been Shiloh where the Lord's sanctuary had been located. The last real event to take place at Shechem was a confrontation between Jacob and the people. Jacob challenged the people to put away their gods, and then Genesis 35 says he buried them under the oak tree at Shechem. It's likely these descendants of Jacob were standing on soil made of the idols of their ancestors. It was underneath their feet, it was the dust in the air they breathed. It was bred into their

bones, the tendency to turn to idols. They want to say, “Far be it from us!” But Joshua has assembled them in a place where they would need to acknowledge, “Near is it to us!” And then he leads them with hard-hitting words.

In fact, some words like these actually were said at my husband’s and my wedding. Not right in the middle of the vows, fortunately, but in the sermon. There our minister predicted that we would fail to keep our vows, in small and sometimes large ways, repeatedly throughout our marriage. So he called us to be humble people who forgave each other, wholeheartedly and incessantly. But then the rascal got specific and predicted that we would disappoint each other in some small way before the reception was over. Starry eyed, clasping hands, we smiled but I don’t think we quite believed him. Sure enough, at the reception one of us turned out not to have purchased some items that were key to our guests’ enjoyment of the evening, and one of us had shown much less interest or frankly ability in the area of dancing than the other would have preferred. I will leave you to guess which was which. Grace abounds.

Our pastor was calling us to humility. To let go of certainty that our marriage would succeed on the engine of our naïve love and our best intentions. He was urging us to lean into God, to look to God for help. Certainty has its downsides, and good leaders work hard to disabuse us of it.

Despite Joshua’s best efforts, it never quite worked for the Israelites. We can play this hand differently. We can open ourselves up to leaders and friends in our lives. We can admit that we need help to be faithful disciples—we need the Church. And we need the Holy Spirit, to revive and purify our hearts. Because it’s all way too close; it’s all around us and deep within us, this tendency to grasp for a happy future in sources other than the living God. As we turn in our hearts this morning to God, we will find him to be merciful, faithful, and powerfully able to keep us loyal to our covenant with him. Of that, we can be certain. Amen.