

Christian Nationalism: The Dangers of Ethnocentrism  
Joshua 3:14 - 4:7

I remind myself from time to time that we humans are animals. It helps me to put my expectations of myself and others in perspective. We are not separate from creation; we are a part of creation and called to be good stewards of it. We are not exceptionally more evolved than the rest of creation; we have just found ways to isolate and elevate ourselves from creation, quite often to our own detriment.

So, when I am dealing with parts of humanity that are especially disturbing to me. I start at that place and remind myself once again that we humans are animals.

Most animal species move in packs or herds for protection. They have profound allegiance to their pack or herd and protect it at all costs. They do this for survival.

Though some humans still exist in predominately interdependent cultures, relying upon each other for food and survival. Most humans have existed in increasingly isolated and independent cultures for thousands of years - and don't necessarily rely upon our herds and packs for survival. But our herd and pack mentality is still deeply ingrained in us - and shows up in interesting places:

Sports team allegiances:

*Angels vs. Dodgers*  
*Raiders vs. Chiefs*

Fierce loyalty and pride in our preferred group, but not necessary for survival - at least not literally

We also see herd and pack mentality show up in communities when traumatic things have happened:

*New York Strong, Uvalde Strong, Paradise Strong, Boston Strong*

A deep feeling of connectedness, relying upon each other for strength and healing - perhaps an emotional interdependence that wasn't realized before

These manifestations of herd and pack mentality are a wonderful way for us to remind ourselves of the power of community and interdependence, and they're generally harmless - but our herd and pack mentality can become harmful when we center our allegiances as our primary lens to judge and evaluate everyone else - particularly when we form biases and preferences based on skin color, economic status, nationality or religion

Anthropologists call this manifestation of herd and pack mentality - ethnocentrism

*Putting your preferred pack or tribe at the center - rather than understanding herds and packs as a generally natural part of creation, of being animals*

We see the evolution from herd and pack mentality to ethnocentrism in our text today. The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for generations, escaped with Moses, and then spent 40 years making their way across the desert from Egypt back to Israel. Our text today records the moment they crossed the Jordan River into Israel or as our text describes it “The Promised Land.”

Joshua told each tribe of Jacob - each family group to place a stone - building an altar in that place so that they would always remember what had transpired to get them to this moment - so that when their children and grandchildren saw the altar and asked what it was for - they could teach them the story of their people. A beautiful sentiment - and a seemingly harmless way to celebrate both tribe allegiance and interdependence at the same time.

READ JOSHUA 3:17 - 4: 7

If the book of Joshua then recorded the stories of each tribe of Jacob from there - telling the stories of how they each made their way in this new land, learning to live among the people and animals there - learning to make a new life - that would be a beautiful story.

If the book of Joshua recorded the stories of how each tribe of Jacob wrestled with understanding the world through a different lens other than their own - letting go of their herd survival mentality - learning to see other cultures and people beyond their own frame of reference and appreciate their heritage without condemning their non-Israelite lineage, that would be a beautiful story. “Because we were once outsiders and foreigners - we welcome the outsider and foreigner” - we hear that echoed in Jewish law, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

But instead, the book of Joshua records a horrific evolution of herd and tribe mentality - to ethnocentrism - and then very quickly to religious nationalism. “Because we were once outcasts and outsiders - we are entitled to this land - and nothing will stop our claim on it.” - definitely not echoed in Jewish law

Starting in chapter 6 - just two chapters after our passage from today, the book of Joshua tells us that God supposedly commanded the Israelites to destroy the city of Jericho and all of its inhabitants, men, and women, young and old, and all of their animals (except of course Rahab and her family who helped Joshua’s spies) - none of Jericho’s residents had ever threatened Joshua and his people - their only crime was not being Israelite. The book of Joshua records similar destruction and carnage of city after city after city, all because apparently, God commanded the complete destruction of everything and everyone not Israelite.

Some stories from the bible share wisdom or guidance; others are wonderful examples of what NOT to do. The book of Joshua invites us into a conversation with our spiritual ancestors about the dangers of believing that your cultural and religious identity is superior to everything and everyone else and that God shares your biases and prejudices.

The book of Joshua in all of its horror is forever there in our Bibles as an embarrassment but also a reminder that God calls us to do better.

Religious Nationalism is toxic - we see that in the book of Joshua - but we have also seen that throughout human history - in fact, there are some pretty horrific examples from our own religion paired with other national identities: The Christian Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, and The Holocaust

And then of course we have the examples of Christian Nationalism in our own country: European colonists and later American citizens slaughtered Native Americans (following the doctrine of Manifest Destiny),

American citizens enslaved Africans, lynched, and perpetually stigmatized African Americans all while quoting scripture and following federal and state laws endorsing their behavior

American citizens have spiritually abused, stigmatized, and even murdered non-cisgender/ non-heterosexual Americans (like Matthew Shepherd and the 25 trans siblings who have been murdered just this year) this horrific killing and abuse has been done all while quoting scripture, and state and federal laws.

And then, Christian Nationalist symbols and rhetoric were on full display as the US capitol was invaded on January 6, 2021 - many in the crowd who were threatening to kill anyone who stood in their way believed they were following God's commands.

As we are seeing and hearing more Christian Nationalist rhetoric in political campaigns both in our country and in other parts of the world. We are called to remember the cautionary advice from our ancestors - because the stories we tell about who we are - matter a great deal.

We are called to be honest about our human capacity for herd and tribe identity and our tendency to place our preferred groups in the center of our thinking.

We are called to be willing to look critically and suspiciously at any group to which we belong - evaluating the toxicity of the stories and identity we share. If the stories we tell our children put us in the position of God's chosen few, we know we're teaching dangerous lessons.

We are called to be suspicious of any biblical or divine mandates that claim to protect us from others who supposedly threaten our identity or purity - if our identity is too fragile for the diversity of God's creation - then it's probably not an identity worth having.

We are called to speak out as Christians against Christian nationalism, especially when it inspires acts of violence.

We are humans. We are beautifully and wonderfully created animals. But we cannot blame our worst behavior on our animal instincts. We are a part of creation and called to be good stewards of it.

We are not exceptionally more evolved than the rest of creation; we have just found ways to isolate and elevate ourselves from creation, quite often to our own detriment and to the detriment of all life on our planet.

May we continue to find our way back to each other and God. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Like the ground around us, O God, we are parched. The harshness of humanity drains us. We are thirsty for a feeling of community and companionship - weary and worn from the fear and isolation of the past couple of years. We get tiny drops of relief as we wander from oasis to oasis seeking out community at church or time with trusted friends and family.

Speak to us in the place today, O God. The assurance of your unconditional love sounds like rain falling into cracked, dry ground. Our hands and hearts stretch out to you, like the tree's leaves and branches open and stretch to catch every spare drop. Let your presence wash over us and soak into our weary souls.

Amen.

### **Invitation to Discipleship**

We pray that every country and culture thrives in peace, health, and freedom. That all have access to clean water and food and a safe place to live. It is not a utopian dream, but it is the focus of our giving, our work, our prayers, and of course our songs. Let us sing of our work and prayers together...

### **Benediction**

Well-known author and preacher Frederick Buechner died at the age of 96 this past week. If you've listened to a sermon in a church in the past six decades, you've likely heard a few Buechner quotes. I have a few favorites of my own.

Today, I share with you a quote from his book, "The Hungering Dark" for our benediction, reminding us to be mindful of just how connected we all are:

*"The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt. No one is an island....So God be with you, stranger who is no stranger."*

Amen.