

## Walking in Circles

### Joshua 6:1-5

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### Real Audio (3 MB)

We spend a lot of life walking in circles, thinking that we are not getting anywhere. But that all depends on our goal. If our goal is to find God, we can't move in a straight line.

Today I am concluding a three-month series of sermons on Walking by Faith. During this series we have journeyed with the Hebrews from the time they left Egypt, walked through the desert, and then finally entered the Promised Land, forty years later. Now that they have finally arrived, the Hebrews encounter a land that is heavily fortified. None of the Canaanites living there are eager to share the land with these new immigrants. So the Hebrews will have to fight to find their place. They will have to struggle, just like they did in the desert.

The only thing that distinguishes the Promised Land from the desert wilderness is that the Promised Land is where you are called to settle. But that doesn't mean life is suddenly easier. There are always battles to fight, and there is always someone in your way. There is even a need to struggle for that which God has promised to give you. Even though God called you to be a lawyer, you still have to struggle with law school. Even though God called you to raise children, you still have to struggle with the original sin that comes bundled into those little cherubs. Even though God called you to bring change to your workplace or to our world, you still have to struggle with all who oppose change. So the fact that you are in a battle doesn't mean you are in the wrong place. Often in both the Old and New Testaments, the right place to be is a place of conflict and struggle.

The first battle the Hebrews faced in the Promised Land was at Jericho, an ancient city with enormous walls that appeared impenetrable. "No one came out," we are told, "and no one went in." As the Hebrews were trying to figure out what they were going to do about this fortress, the Lord gave them the battle plan. But first, the Lord told Joshua, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers." That is always the first and most important thing to see in a battle. If God called you to this struggle, then it is his battle, and his victory. So your job isn't to prevail but to watch how God does.

After making that clear, God revealed the plan to Joshua. He told him to march in a circle around the city once a day for six days, with seven priests bearing seven trumpets in front. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times. Then the priests were supposed to blow the trumpets for all their worth, and the soldiers were ordered to scream their heads off. God said, "Then the walls will come tumbling down, and you guys can just head on into town."

Does this sound like God, or what? For forty years the Hebrews have been preparing for this moment when they would finally do battle in the land. Maybe they even practiced some field exercises climbing walls. But when the big day comes, what are their orders but to walk around in circles for a solid week? Can you imagine what must have been going on in the minds of the Hebrew soldiers. Day after day, they just walked in circles.

You know how that feels don't you? You thought God had called you to a great mission. You got committed, prepared, and were expecting to just charge ahead. But that's not what happened. Mostly, it seems like you're just walking in circles.

Maybe you're just driving around in circles with the minivan. It starts in the morning when you drop the kids off to school and drop the dog off at the vet, then circle over to the store to pick up some groceries, then circle home to pick up the clothes scattered on the floor and the spilled milk from breakfast. In the afternoon you circle back to school to pick up the kids and drop one off at piano lessons and the other at soccer. Then you circle around to pick up the dog from the vet, pick up the dry cleaning, and the vacuum

that was at the repair shop. Then you circle back to pick up the kid from piano lessons and your spouse at the metro stop. On the way home you pick up a pizza because you don't have time to cook before you have to circle back to school for PTA. You sit down to eat the pizza, and remember you forgot the kid at soccer, so you circle back. Last year a woman told me she listened on her car cassette player to the entire series of my Lenten sermons, in the course of one day, just driving around in circles.

Maybe your day is spent walking around in circles at the office. You just make it to your desk eager to get some work done when you receive a call to come to your boss' office. After spending a long time listening to his anxiety, you finally circle back to your desk, but make the mistake of stopping by your secretary's desk and asking how she is doing. She tells you about her boyfriend anxiety for a while and ends by telling you that you are late for a committee meeting. You finally get out of the committee meeting, where the agenda just circled around and went nowhere. You get back to your desk only to discover that your computer's down, so you go upstairs to borrow an office from somebody who called in sick, which sounds pretty good to you and it isn't even 10 o'clock yet.

So the day continues as you circle around anxious offices and dull meetings, jammed copiers, fax machines, and computers that are demon-possessed, and phone messages that multiply faster than bunnies. At the end of the day as you circle back on the drive home, you ask yourself, "What in the world am I getting accomplished? How can this be the Promised Land?"

The great devotional writer Oswald Chambers has written, "We think that we have been called to do exceptional things with our lives, but we have not. We have been called to do ordinary things in exceptional ways." Remember how much the disciple Peter wanted to do exceptional things? That was why he picked up a sword and went flailing into the crowd, accomplishing nothing more than cutting off the ear of an innocent man. By contrast, Jesus picked up an ordinary towel and a basin of water to wash his disciples' feet, accomplishing the greatest lesson on leadership we have ever seen. As Jesus kept illustrating, day after day, the holy is found in ordinary things. It is found even in things that go around in circles.

Have you ever noticed how much God loves circles? The sun goes up, and then it comes down, then it circles up again. Day after day, around and around. God just loves to watch that! So does the year just keep circling around between spring, summer, fall, and winter, always in that order, year after year. This is because even creation is created with a sense of liturgy.

A liturgy is an order of worship. Our worship services follow an order that revolves around hearing the Word of God. We begin by singing a hymn of praise in adoration of God, and after encountering the Word, we circle back to end worship by singing a hymn of praise in thanksgiving. Similarly, the whole liturgical year revolves around the circle of telling the gospel. The new liturgical year begins next Sunday with Advent, when we anticipate the coming of Christ. After Christmas when Christ is born, and Epiphany when he is presented to the world, it is not long before we are in Lent. That's the forty-day period in which we follow Christ into the desert to prepare ourselves to be his disciples. That culminates in the passion of Holy Week, which ends with the startling discovery of new life at Easter. Forty days later we are telling the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church to allow it to represent the visible body of the risen Christ.

The rest of the year is spent in what is called Ordinary Time when we focus on the coming kingdom of God on earth. Today is the last day of the liturgical year. It is called Christ the King Sunday. Today we remember that in the end, Jesus wins. His kingdom will triumph over every fortress of evil, disease, and heartache. Next week, as we circle back to Advent, we will again long for this Savior who is the only one who can bring the kingdom about. So in the end, we remember our calling is not to do Jesus' work for him. Our calling is just to follow him faithfully through the circle of the Gospel.

As a pastor, I have the privilege of standing with people in times of great crisis. I also get to talk with people who are just stuck walking around their dreams, but not able to charge ahead. It seems to me that those who need grace the most are not those in crisis. There is something in the human spirit that rises to those moments. But when you are just walking around, waiting for the Savior to knock down a few walls, that is when your faith is severely tested. And that is when you demonstrate you can follow Jesus, even

into the ordinary.

Not even Jesus spent every day with high drama. If you add up all the days recorded for us in the gospels, it doesn't even account for a year. That means Jesus had plenty of days when nothing happened worth writing down. Imagine if you got to spend one day with Jesus--just one. All day you were waiting for him to do something miraculous. Maybe he will heal someone, or feed the five thousand, or at least cast out a few demons. But it turned out to be just a day when Jesus and the disciples were doing laundry--just an ordinary day. Well, it would be hard to consider any day with Jesus ordinary. Right! Even if you only got to do your laundry with Jesus, it would be pretty incredible. That is precisely what you get to do.

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is a present and sanctifying part of your daily routines. Thus, to follow him is to find his holiness in every small detail of life. In the words of Edmund Burke, "No man makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing only because it is not everything." So the report you are writing is not going to win a Pulitzer Prize? It's just a long memo. That doesn't mean you are not called to write it for and with Jesus Christ. If you knew it was a team project with Jesus, you would take it more seriously, you would be faithful to your calling, and you would certainly enjoy it a lot more.

On the seventh day, Joshua led his priests and soldiers around Jericho seven times. After the seventh time, the priests blew the trumpets, the soldiers shouted, and the walls fell down. Then the Hebrews charged ahead and took the city. There are moments when God makes a way and calls you to charge ahead. But those moments are so few and far between that you dare not base your joy on them. Joy has to be found simply in walking around with God.

Just before the battle for Jericho began, the commander of the army of the Lord, possibly an angel, came to visit Joshua to tell him that he was on holy ground. That's how Joshua found the courage to be faithful. He now knew that God owns Jericho and can do what he wants with its walls. God also owns your office, your minivan, your school, wherever your routines are conducted.

So you are already spending every day on holy ground. You aren't going to make the day more holy by your fleeting moments of victory. But you can make the circling routine holy, by turning it into a repeated liturgy of faithfulness.

Open our eyes, O God, to see that you are with us, and that wherever you are found the ground is already holy, and we are already fulfilling our holy calling. Amen.