

Joshua 7:16-26

Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me." Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath." So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord. Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. 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. 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 ever since.

Sometimes the most powerful parts of Scripture aren't statements. Sometimes they're questions. Maybe that sounds strange at first drop, but I really think it's true. Sometimes a question is the best medicine for the soul because it forces the reader (you!) to grapple internally to find the answer. And then as you grapple, God does his healing work.

Psalm 139 has a powerful question like that. Actually there are two of them. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" Those are not questions to be quickly answered or dismissed. They are questions designed to stick with you and get you to really think. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

See here's the thing about those questions. They're great questions because they force us to ponder the fact that God's omnipresence, or God's everywhere-ness (I know it's not a word, but I think you know what it means.), is a double edged sword. Let me put it like this. Sometimes it's good that you can't flee from God's presence. And sometimes it's bad (from a human perspective, of course!). That was Achan's problem. If he was here I'm pretty sure he'd say, "I wish there was a moment or two of my life when God hadn't been there."

What's stunning about that moment is that Achan's weakness doesn't even seem like a big deal. Jericho's walls came tumbling down. That was totally a God thing. All the people did

was walk, toot some horns, and shout. And then God collapsed those walls. So the soldiers went in and did the necessary door-to-door fighting to take the city. To show that this was God's victory everything in the city was to be dedicated to God, which meant it was to be destroyed. Simple rule, right? Perhaps Achan was going door to door he walked inside some house and thought, "Sweet! I just hit the jackpot. This is where the Joneses lived." And since it was all going to be destroyed his little mind went on, "What's the big deal? I'll just take a little somethin' somethin'. Nobody will know. Won't hurt anyone will it?" And so he walked away with some pretty nice loot.

Big deal, right? A little silver, a little gold, and a nice robe. Why should anyone care? Why would it be missed, right? God was irate. In fact, he was so irate that he created a national calamity so that there would be a day of reckoning for Achan. They went to fight a tiny little berg that they should have been able to squash like people squash ants, but they got beat. And 36 people died. It was a devastating day - a true national calamity for Israel. All because Achan took a little silver, a little gold, and a nice robe.

It's all very upsetting. I can't imagine how that felt to those mothers and wives and kids of those men who died because Achan ticked God off. It was truly a national calamity and it brought on Achan a day of reckoning. Joshua shot out of bed first thing and got to work finding out who was at fault. And then you get one of the most fascinating and I think one of the most important scenes in Bible history. In grim detail and in verse after verse you hear how God zeroed in on his sinner. I think it's worth reading to you so you get the sense of what's happening: **"Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken."** (v. 17, 18) God just zeroes in on Achan. He's unrelenting and his aim is perfect. It reminds me of footage from the 90's when we were fighting in the Middle East and we'd get footage of these laser guided missiles perfectly hitting their targets in the middle of the night. Bam. The Lord got him. He wasn't going to get away.

Then comes the confrontation and the punishment. Joshua said to Achan, "Give glory to the Lord and give him praise," which basically is a really nice and reverent way to say, "Fess up buddy. We know you did something. We just don't know what." And then it all comes out. Achan says, "It's true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. I coveted and took a robe, some silver, and some gold and they're hidden in the family tent." And that's the story of how Achan got caught red-handed.

Correction. That's the story of how Achan found out that he had been caught red-handed. I told you that I thought this is one of the most important and fascinating scenes in the Bible. Now I get to tell you why. It forces us to stop telling lies to and about ourselves. Here's the lie that we like to believe: God doesn't know and if he does, he won't care. See that's why I corrected myself. Achan was caught red-handed the minute he coveted. God knew the thought and condemned it. Achan was caught red-handed the minute he acted to pick up the loot. He was caught red-handed right there in that moment. He just didn't know it. He

told himself lies like, “It’s not that big a deal. God doesn’t know and if he does, he won’t care.”

Tell me that doesn’t hit home. Tell me you can’t relate. Tell me you’re not saying to yourself, “He was probably a nice guy, who slipped up and did something dumb.” Truth is, he probably was. And that’s the scary part. We’ve all slipped up life. We all have a moment that will put blush on our cheeks or a tear in our eyes if we knew we were caught red-handed like when you stared at the image on your computer screen or told a whopper about someone you didn’t like or took a little somethin’ somethin’ that technically wasn’t yours, but wasn’t really someone else’s either (like Achan did). That’s why I started with the question I started with today. I think it’s worth asking. Is it really a good thing that God is everywhere all the time?

So Achan fessed up to his crime. And there was no leniency, no mercy, no grace at all. In fact, the punishment is notable for its brutality and its completeness. His kids, his cattle, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and the loot all were rounded up. If you read it in the Bible it’s like the list goes on and on and on. God is really making that point that everything and everyone complicit in the crime were going down right along with Achan. And everyone and everything was stoned and then burned. I can only imagine how that scene burned itself onto the national consciousness. I mean how can the clatter of rocks and the scent of that fire not forever change a person and a nation and a world that witnessed it. It was such a horrid, brutal scene that, like I told you, it truly did stick itself into the national consciousness of that people. They even named the place for that event. They called it the Valley of Achor, which means the Valley of Trouble. I think we can all agree that they chose a very appropriate name.

The prophets talked the Valley of Achor too, but not the in way we just did. Hosea predicted, **“I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.” (v. 15)** Fascinating prediction. Achor, a door of hope. What is it the prophet is predicting? Let me tell you. When you say to yourself, “I’ve been caught red-handed. I see in the Valley of Achor my future. I can no longer deny it. I’ve lapsed. I’ve fallen. And now I see that God knows about it and will demand a punishment that is complete and brutal.” You say that kind of thing to yourself and your start seeing stones coming at you in the mind’s eye and the fire burning in your future. It’s in that moment when you are standing in the Valley of Achor.

But here’s the future that the prophet is predicting. God will turn that moment into a door of hope. How? I’ll tell you. Every year this time of year, we sing *A Mighty Fortress* because it’s so fitting to sing this hymn with the theme of this Sunday. And, unlike so many other Sundays of the church year where the Bible stories change, we hear the same Bible story year after year after year. And I’m telling you I love it. Because year after year after year we get the same hope that we need so badly. It never gets old. I’m hoping you remember the history because we just read it a few minutes ago.

The Spirit leads Jesus out into the desert to do what no human had ever done. Face off with Satan and win. We watched Satan bring his A-game. I mean he really tried. It was clash of the titans. And Jesus won. He actually won. Let me tell you why this is important to you.

I'm not real proud of this, but I have watched WWF wrestling in the past. I don't know what version I was watching, but the guys were able to tag a teammate and put them in the ring if things weren't going well to fight for them. That's what the first Sunday in Lent is telling you to do with Jesus. Tag his hand. Do it. Let him get in the ring and fight for you. He'll win. Do you see it?

That's what makes the Valley of Achor a door of hope. You have to go down to Valley of Achor before you'll know to tag Jesus in. You have to feel the threat of the stones raining down. You have to feel the heat of the fire and maybe even let it singe your hair before you realize that you need to stop lying to yourself and admit you've already lost; get out of the fight and tag Jesus in for you. Because he'll take on your temptations; he'll taken on Satan head to head; he'll fight for your soul; he'll secure your eternity forever. Tag Jesus in. He'll win.

I'm getting to that point in my calling as a pastor that I'm starting to preach on a lot of texts that I've preached on before. This is one of them. I went back and read what I said before I wrote this one. As read the sermon I became annoyed and said to myself, "Poor Trinity members listening to my young sermons. What a bonehead! You missed it." You only get to preach on this Scripture every third year so I promised myself that this time I would make the vital connection. Achan brings each of us to our personal Valley of Achor. We can't deny that we deserve the stones. We know God has caught us at one time or another red-handed. But here's the deal: the prophets tell us that the Valley of Achor is a door of hope. And it's true. When you go down into that valley it's dark and it's depressing. You know you've been caught. But that's God doing his work in you. You needed to go to that valley to see the stones coming and feel the fire licking so that you tag out thinking, "I'm going to end up like Achan if I don't get out." Tag Jesus in to fight for you. He's your hope. He punched Satan out. He did it in his temptation in the desert. And then he went and took the stones and the fire in his personal Valley of Achor on the cross. The result? No more Achor. No more trouble. Only hope. Only heaven. That's why we celebrate this every year on the First Sunday in Lent. Today's your day to tag, your champion, Jesus in for you. I can promise you this: he'll win for you. And no more questions either about whether or not you want or need to flee from God's presence. You've got Jesus fighting for you. Amen.