

World Communion Sunday



Sunday, October 2
9:00am 11:00am



What Happened
to the Jebusites?

Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2022 “What Happened to the Jebusites?” | World Communion Sunday Charlie Berthoud | Genesis 15:17-21

Happy World Communion Sunday!

As we gather around the communion table today, millions of Christians around the world will do the same thing—sharing the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

I’m very grateful that our church has partnerships and connections with Christians in Guatemala, Peru, Kenya, South Sudan, Haiti, and Indonesia.

While it would be appropriate to celebrate those global mission partnerships and connections today, instead, we are focusing on Native and Indigenous people in this country and around the world. We have a drum circle in the courtyard and we a speaker on Native communities with a focus on racism and justice.

Our scripture reading for today comes from Genesis, which is where we’ve spent the past four weeks, with a series on Women in Genesis. The sub-title was “Hearing the Voices of People Long Silenced.”

In that same spirit of hearing voices of people long silenced, today we are listening for the voices of Native and Indigenous people, through the lens of Scripture.

The phrase “hearing the voices of people long silenced” comes from “A Brief Statement of Faith” which was written by a committee in the 1980s. A Native American member of the drafting committee advocated for phrase about hearing long silenced people.

In Genesis, we read about God promise to Abraham and Sarah, that they will have descendants as numerous as the stars, and that God will lead those descendants out of slavery and to a “Promised Land.”

The journey to that promised land, known as the Exodus, is a foundational story of our faith. In essence, it tells us about the enslaved Hebrew people being rescued by God from the brutality of Pharaoh, brought through the Red Sea where Pharaoh's chariots were destroyed, led on a long journey through the wilderness toward this new place.

This Exodus and the journey to the promised land has inspired people of faith through the years, with the hope that God can rescue people from oppression and despair—bringing people to a new place, to a promised land, literally or metaphorically.

God is seen as the liberator of the Hebrew people, and God is hoped to be liberator still.

Enslaved Africans here in the United States and oppressed Latin Americans have been particularly grateful for the narrative of the exodus.

I know this well. In college I wrote my senior thesis on the role of Christianity in the Nicaraguan revolution, and then after college I spend a year in Nicaragua.

The biblical account of God saving the people in oppression and leading them toward to new land is an inspiring story... but there is a major interpretative problem with the story which I didn't realize until after my time in Nicaragua, and we collectively often ignore.

Listen for God's word.

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

Those of us who went to seminary and who spend a lot of time studying the Bible are tempted to fill our sermons with all sorts of biblical, theological, and historical tidbits that we think are interesting.

Rev Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor at Riverside Church in New York City in the early 20th century cautioned fellow preachers about getting mired down with too many

of these biblical, theological, and historical tidbits, writing:

“Nobody except the preacher comes to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.”

--Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick

I appreciate this guidance, and I try to restrain myself, to avoid too many of those tidbits, too much of that biblical, historical, and theological minutiae.

But today, I think we need to actually consider the Jebusites, as well as the other people who inhabited the promised land prior to the arrival of the Hebrews.

The Bible paints a grim picture of the conquest of the land of Canaan. At various points we read about how the natives in the land were decimated, so that God’s people could have their promised land.

One of my seminary classmates is now a professor at the University of Kansas. His name is Robert Allen Warrior, who is part of the Osage Nation. He has taught at Cornell, Stanford, and the University of Illinois.

He wrote a fascinating article over thirty years reflecting on this often-ignored part of the exodus story which really opened my eyes, writing about how God goes from being the deliverer of the Hebrews to becoming the conqueror of the people who lived in the “promised land.”

The article is called “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians.” He implicitly asks about the fate of the Jebusites, and more importantly about how the exodus and conquest of Canaan narrative has been appropriated through history to justify conquest.

Perhaps the most egregious example is here in the United States, where Europeans arrived with a religious zeal, feeling like they had found the promised land that God had given them, with little regard for the humanity of the native peoples already here. As Warrior points out in his article:

Many Puritan preachers were fond of referring to Native Americans as Amelkites and Canaanites—in other words, people who, if they would not be converted, were worthy of annihilation. (P. 264)

The same thinking continued into the 1800s, with the notion of Manifest Destiny,

that the new United States was destined by God to spread democracy and capitalism across the continent. This thinking led to continued brutality and cruelty toward Native populations, which sadly has continued since the arrival of the Europeans.

Dr. Warrior writes:

“The Canaanites should be at the center of Christian theological reflection and political action. They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except perhaps for the land itself.... [Bible commentaries] express little concern for the status of the indigenes and their rights as human beings and as nations.”

Native communities continue to resist, and slowly we are learning together.



The July issue of “National Geographic” magazine is filled with stories of creative and persistent native communities reclaiming their sovereignty, their lands, and their ways of life.

One story is about the reconstruction of totem poles, which had been taken by explorers and collectors and put in museums. The article says that totem poles are like stained glass windows.

Imagine if someone came to our church and removed the stained glass windows and the cross, so they could take them to a museum.

Many organizations now do land acknowledgements, recognizing the history of the land where they find themselves. To do a land acknowledgement well involves a lot of research, conversation, and respect. It’s something worth looking into here at Covenant.

<https://nativegov.org/news/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/>

Saint Dunstan’s Episcopal Church on University Avenue has had verbal and spoken land acknowledgements about Ho Chunk people for several years, and this year, they decided to take action. After a long period of research and reflection, they paid \$4000 to a Wisconsin Native American group, describing the payment as a

land tax, recognizing that their church is on land that once belonged to Native people.

<https://madison365.com/this-is-something-we-owe-madison-church-pays-voluntary-tax-to-indigenous-nations/>

So when we read about Moses and the journey to from slavery to freedom, we can't just say God led the Hebrew people to the Promised Land and gave it to them. We have to ask about the people who were already there—like the Jebusites.

For the record, historians and theologians aren't really sure what actually happened to the people known as the Jebusites. They may have been destroyed in battle or they may have been absorbed into the Israelites.

There's actually an interesting theory by biblical scholar Norman Gottwald that Canaanite peasants may have revolted against Canaanite elites, with the help the escaped slaves from Egypt. I'd love to share more about it, but then I'd be getting into biblical, theological, and historical minutiae....

We need to read the Bible carefully—listening for the voices of everyone, asking **“What is God saying to us?”** And **“How is God calling us?”**

It's important to recognize the ways that we put ourselves into the stories, how we identify with certain biblical characters.

Think about the story of the Good Samaritan, the “foreigner” who helped and injured traveler, after the religious leaders ignored the traveler.

We like to think of ourselves as the Good Samaritan, the one who would help. And I've preached sermons about us striving to be be Good Samaritans. This is not a bad thing, as long as we recognize that sometimes we can find ourselves elsewhere in the story.

Maybe we're the innkeeper, who did his job, but didn't seem to go out of his way to help or get very involved. Sometimes we're the wounded person, in desperate need of someone to help us—emotionally, spiritually, physically. And sometimes, we're the Levite or the priest, the “religious” people who walk past a situation of pain and sadness, not taking the time to get our hands dirty and help someone in need.

In fact, if we continue to ignore Native and Indigenous people, along with others

who suffer, then we are being like the priest and the Levite.

For us, what's important on this World Communion Sunday and any time, is remembering the Good News of God's love, for everyone. Jesus Christ came to our world to share this message.

In Luke 4, read we learn of Jesus' inaugural message, his first sermon:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news

Earlier in Luke, the angel proclaimed the “good news of great joy for all the people.” All people.

Jesus knows of the realities of human nature and social systems that tend to ignore certain people. So Jesus makes it clear that this good news is for all people, especially people who have been ignored, mistreated, forgotten. The full text of his inaugural message is:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Luke 4.18-19

Jesus came to bring good news to the whole world. Not just to religious and political leaders, not just the people with the most money, not just the country with the biggest army.

Together we continue to learn about God's love, which is for **everyone**, and we continue to live as new people, sharing God's love with the world.