

Neither!
Courageous Series Week 6
Joshua 5
October 2, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

We're in the last two weeks of a series called Courageous—if you're new we're looking at a character in the Bible who was told by God to be strong and courageous amidst a huge transition and as he takes the lead of a nation of people facing all sorts of challenges

And then he is! At every turn, Joshua faces all kinds of obstacles and challenges
And he chooses a strong and courageous life over and over and over again

And so we're looking at his story and talking about how WE might live lives of every-day courage, too

Because we feel most alive and are our best selves when we're living courageously and we believe that's because living courageously is more in line with how God made us to live!

And along with that we're also on the verge of a big transition as a church--

at some point later this fall we're going to start our new Pittsboro service and we're going to invite a bunch of folks to be strong and courageous to help start that service

and those of us who are staying here will need to be strong and courageous as we bless those folks to go and start something new

Our mission as a church is to love all of Chatham County with the bold love of Jesus, which is going to require us to be strong and courageous at every turn.

Today, Joshua is going to have a run-in with an angel who's going to deliver what initially is going to sound like bad news but in the end it turns out to be really good news.

That ever happened to you? Not the angel part, but the bad news that turns out to be good news!

Have you ever heard something that at first was discouraging to you or you interpreted as trouble or bad news

But as you sat with it a little longer or as it played out, it turned out to actually be better than you thought? Maybe even better than what you would have originally wanted to hear?

Today, Joshua is going to hear some news that he probably didn't want to hear initially but if he's willing to accept it, ultimately it's the fuel for a truly strong and courageous life

And today we're also going to be challenged by a word that we might not want to hear.

But if we're willing to accept it and walk in it, this word will be the fuel for our own strong and courageous life

Bible/no Bible/BOOK TABLE is open today, pick up a free Bible there or stop by and purchase a great book from the book table

13 Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

So Joshua is likely out scouting out the area outside the city of Jericho, he's getting r and there's a man with a sword drawn, and so Joshua asks the obvious question:

whose side are you on? Are you for us or are you for our enemies?

This is a fair question, the guy's got his sword drawn, he's ready for some sort of battle, Joshua wants to know which side he'll be battling for

"Whose side are you on?"

This question surfaces all over the place in our world, doesn't it? Whose side are you on?

If you were a kid in the middle of your parent's divorce, you might have tremendous pain and psychological and emotional damage around this heart-breaking, difficult question

Sometimes when there are conflicts between friends or people at work or in extended families, the question gets put to us, "whose side are you on?"

If WE'RE the ones in the middle of the conflict sometimes WE want to know from everyone around us: whose side are you on?

Sometimes in stressful times, we resort to a sort of tribalism: let me gather up as many people in my tribe and in my corner as possible

And we've talked about the value of appropriately borrowing courage from the people around us when we need it or are running short

But then at some point it tips over into being unhealthy, doesn't it?

Where we're amassing as many people on our side and in our corner as we possibly can, just trying to get as many people around us to prop us up as we can and to agree with us over and against that OTHER person

In stressful situations and seasons of our lives, when our radar is up and we're a bit on edge we want to know: are you for us or for our enemies?

Joshua here asks this really important question on the verge of his first major battle as commander-in-chief of the nation of Israel to a man wielding a sword

And what does Joshua want this guy to say in response to the question? "YOURS! I'm on YOUR side, Joshua!" That's what we all want to hear, right?

But here's the response that he gets from the sword-wielding man:

14 "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come."

Okay, so lots of let-downs here for Joshua! Here's the news that feels initially like bad news!

First, off NEITHER was not an option that Joshua gave this man! This was not a note passed in elementary school that had 3 check-the-box options: yes, no or neither!

This was a binary choice: us or our enemies? Good guys or bad guys?

But this guy refuses to pick a side. NEITHER! He replies.

But then it gets worse as the man identifies himself: *as the commander of the army of the Lord I have now come?*

"Wait. If you're the commander of the army of the Lord, and if we're here at this place because GOD sent us here, then shouldn't you be on OUR side?"

If there was ever any people group in all of ancient or modern history that God would say, "I'm on YOUR side" it would be Israel right here and right now!

He's hand-delivered them out of Egypt, brought them through the desert, he's just done another miracle to stop the Jordan River and allow them to cross over on dry ground

In every way to this point it would seem like given the choice of "are you for us or our enemies?" God's angels would say "YOURS!"

But the commander of the Lord's armies declares to Joshua one big, giant, NEITHER! That's the news that initially feels like bad news for Joshua.

Now the question is: Why??

Why at this moment would God seem to hedge on his endorsement?

And the answer would seem to be this: because ***God is always and forever on his own side.***

God has his own mission, his own agenda, his own eternal purposes that he is working out that are bigger than ONE battle, bigger than ONE situation

God has his plans not just for Israel but for the entire world, ALL the nations, that's where God is at work

God's mission is redemption, God's mission is restoration, God's mission is to call all people's to repentance and to bring renewal and healing to this world forever and ever amen!

THAT is the huge, ginormous, global, cosmic agenda of God to restore all things and to make all things new!

And for God to give up on HIS agenda in order to serve ANY OTHER agenda would be disastrous!

For God to abandon his own plan and say that he's on board with someone ELSE's plan or purposes other than his own would be the worst thing that could ever happen to the world

And what happens to people and groups of people who start to think that God's on THEIR side is what? Self-righteousness, arrogance!

If God's on my side then whatever it is I want to do, God must be behind, I've got God in my corner so I've got free reign to do whatever it is I want to do.

But here we see that God is WITH Joshua but he is FOR himself and for HIS OWN plan

And God being WITH Joshua and FOR himself and his own agenda and purposes is the absolute BEST combination of gifts that God could possibly give to Joshua

And in this encounter, the angel of the Lord is giving Joshua the same opportunity that he offers to you and to me:

To abandon our agendas and to embrace something much better: the redeeming agenda of the perfect God in heaven who is Lord over heaven and earth and who is bringing his perfect plans to be worked out in this place

And so the commander of the Lord's armies tells Joshua the commander of Israel's army, whom God himself has declared to be his own people, a great big fat NEITHER!

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know if you've noticed or not yet, but we're in an election year.

Many of us are understandably concerned about the state of our country and of the world

And then on top of the circumstances, you've got two very BIG and very CONTROVERSIAL personalities who are the two choices

And some of us are very sure which of the two we think is best equipped to lead our country, Some of us are VERY UNSURE and feel pretty confused by all of it

But because this stakes feel so high, and because we feel so rightly concerned about what's coming and what happens next, we want to know from the people around us:

who's side are you on?

And sometimes people will ask me: “whose side are you on, Alex?” Or they’ll ask, “Whose side is the church on?”

By the way, in case you didn’t know as a non-profit church, it’s illegal for us to endorse any candidates

Or sometimes people will ask me, “Whose side is God on in all of this?”

In our country for a couple of decades there was a tendency by people in the church from BOTH parties to say that their candidate was God’s candidate

And this morning in response to that great question, “Whose side is God on?”

the commander of the armies of the Lord declares to us God’s great big huge “NEITHER!”

God will NEITHER be tied to a Republican or Democratic candidate or party or platform

Because God is on his OWN side, he has his OWN platform, he’s got his OWN plans and agendas and those are too wonderful, too powerful, too sweeping, and way too important to be submitted to the lesser plans or goals of one particular party

And some of you are elated that God leans “NEITHER” because you’re feeling rather NEITHER-ish about this election too!

But God’s “NEITHER” has nothing to do with who’s running this time around and everything to do with how God ALWAYS relates to human governments and institutions

We see this with Jesus in the New Testament. Think about the situation that Jesus dropped into

He is born into the nation of Israel that is occupied by the Roman army that has steamrolled all of the middle east and Europe

And all around him swirls the question: ***Jesus, are you for the kingdom of Rome or are you for the kingdom of Israel? Which kingdom are you for, Jesus?***

But which kingdom does Jesus end up talking about over and over and over again? ***The Kingdom of God***

He will not fall into EITHER the kingdom of Israel or the mighty Kingdom of Rome: NEITHER!
Jesus declares this parallel, third kingdom—the kingdom of God

He loves Israel and ***participates in the life of the people of Israel***—he goes to the synagogue regularly, he likely lived what looked like a typical roving Jewish teacher of his day

While at the same time he CONDEMNS the Jewish political and religious system for how they oppress people and REFUSES to get on board with the Jewish leader's agendas

Jesus will not BLINDLY ENDORSE everything that the Jewish people do, because he is not blindly ENDORSING the kingdom of Israel

The biblical word to describe how Jesus condemns the Jewish political and religious system is that he's **PROPHETIC**: to be prophetic in the Bible is not necessarily to tell the future

To be prophetic in the Bible is **to speak the TRUTH** to people.

Truth-speaking was the main role of the prophets in the Bible, and it's what we see Jesus do over and over again to the religious and political powers of Israel

He's calling them OUT of their primary identification with the kingdom of Israel and INTO the kingdom of God over and over again.

And at the same time, he loves those who are affiliated with the kingdom of Rome

every time Jesus loves on a tax-collector, he is engaging with Jewish tax-collectors who have chosen to affiliate with the Roman kingdom rather than the kingdom of Israel

And what he does to people who have chosen to identify with the Kingdom of Rome is call them OUT of kingdom of Rome and INTO the Kingdom of God—just like he does the people of Israel

So we see that this angel that refuses to cast God's lot in with Israel is not just a rogue angel.

Jesus does this exact same thing, he issues this exact same bold NEITHER to the two kingdoms that were vying for power in his day and his time.

This is so important that I want to go off-road for just a few minutes to unpack what this means for Jesus-people

especially in this season and in this highly politicized world that we live in and then we'll come back to how this helps us to live strong and courageous lives

In this world, It seems like you've got **two options: either pick a political side OR slouch into a cynical "neither"**

To which I want to declare a very important **NEITHER** to either of these two options!

And I want to propose to you that the NEITHER that we're talking about here looks very different from the CYNICAL neither and here's how:

the cynic's neither has the problem that cynicism always has: it can only deconstruct and undermine, it cannot build up anything beautiful, valuable or good

Walking in **the NEITHER of God means saying NO to the worldly options in front of us IN ORDER TO SAY YES to the Kingdom of God**

This NEITHER is ***not cynical but hopeful***, not giving up but trusting in GREATER THINGS than we can see here before us

Let's talk about what ***the Kingdom of God "Neither"*** means for those of us who are Christians—stick with me here because it could be easy to mis-understand what I'm saying, I hope I can explain this clearly and if you've got questions let's talk, but I believe that this is what the Scriptures teach:

1. Our primary citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of the United States of America

We are the people of God first and foremost.

Nations and other kingdoms rise and fall, eventually someday this great country will fall as well as great as it is and as wonderful as it is and as glad as I am to live here and not anywhere else in the world

No earthly kingdom is eternal. And as God's children we are to be more hooked into and attached to God's Kingdom than any country, including and especially our own

2. Because our King so sacrificially loves the world, we are to sacrificially love the world, too.

The Scriptures declare that every single person in our country and in our world is made in God's image and that God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross for our sins

And so because our King has shown such tremendous love for neighbors, for our nation, for our WORLD, then we, too must love them as he has

See, because all of our hopes are NOT tied to this world, what that does is free us up to LOVE this world, our country and OTHER countries, our own people and people who don't look like us, like no one else does

And so we lay our lives down for this place NOT because our lives are built around this place but because our lives are built around ANOTHER place, a better place, a bigger kingdom than our own country

3. Loving the world will often look like political involvement.

Jesus said that those who followed him were like salt and in a time with no refrigeration, salt was a preservative that kept things from spoiling

To have genuine Jesus followers who are lawyers, and housekeepers and doctors and chimney sweeps and chemists and mechanics and physicists and office managers and teachers, taxi drivers and project managers—that's a gift to the whole world!

And as we follow Jesus and participate in his kingdom, some of us will feel compelled to become involved in the political arena
and thank God there are genuine Jesus-followers who are both Republicans and Democrats!

When they're following Jesus faithfully, they're acting like salt, like a preserving agent that keeps things from spoiling in either party

But here's the catch:

4. "Neither" means that Kingdom of God people are both participants and prophets to their own political parties, just like Jesus

If we affiliate ourselves with a political party, we are to participate just like Jesus did within his own Jewish context: he was both a participant AND a prophet

He was a person who spoke the truth about his own people's problems. Jesus was prophetic NOT against the OTHER guys, he didn't do tons of speeches about how messed up the Romans were

He spent plenty of time speaking the truth about the brokenness in his OWN Jewish context.

If you are a Kingdom of God person, you recognize that YOUR OWN political party's agenda is not the same as God's agenda.

You're not JUST poking holes in the other parties politics
you're aware and speaking of the gaps in your own party's platforms and goals that do not yet conform to the purposes and priorities of the Lord

There are places in both political parties where there is some overlap with what God cares about that is to be celebrated and we can say "YES!" to

AND there are places in both political parties where there are tremendous gaps or goals that are at odds with God's desire for the world that we must look squarely at and declare a prophetic, truth-speaking NO to in order to hopefully see change come about.

And so we never fully give ourselves over to any party's agenda, because we are always first and foremost devoted to the kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God comes first, every other political or national or military kingdom is a distant second at best

and every single one of them falls short of the glory of God and his purposes in this world.

This is a rough outline of what a Kingdom of God “Neither” means in the midst of a highly charged and politicized culture.

There’s a great book on the book table that talks about our involvement in politics along some of these same lines, so check that out if you’d like to do more thinking along these lines

But before we close, I want to come back to Joshua and how this “Neither” can empower us to live strong and courageous lives

after Joshua gets this shocking “NEITHER” from the angel, here’s what he does:

Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?” ¹⁵ The commander of the Lord’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

Joshua wanted this man who turns out to probably be an angel to be on his side, instead, he gets the shocking “neither”

And in what follows, the angel instead invites Joshua to be on God’s side

And what is the way that we transfer our allegiance, the way that we transfer our hope, the way that we transfer our weight into God’s kingdom?

Worship. Worship. Worship. Worship is the way that we intentionally shift our hearts from this kingdom to God’s kingdom

And that’s what Joshua is called to do. To worship. Some of you wonder why the heck we sing here on Sunday mornings

Maybe you just don’t like to sing, maybe it’s just weird to you. But here’s what we’re doing, and here’s why

If we don’t worship God, we will worship all the wrong things. If we don’t put our trust in God, we will lose ourselves and ruin ourselves by putting our trust in something much lesser.

And so we sing as one way to worship, one way to put our hope and our trust in the kingdom of God

And we have to do this regularly because left to ourselves, our hope and our trust will drift back to some smaller kingdom here in this world

Singing isn’t the only way that we express worship. We can pray, we can intentionally focus our work to the glory of God. We can parent as worship, we can do everyday life as worship

But it requires intentionality, and singing is one way that we weekly gather to re-orient ourselves around this King and this kingdom in the face of so many other things that clamor for our attention and our worship

And so Joshua worships. The bad news that God wasn't on his side is followed up by the good news of the invitation to participate in something much bigger, much better

Joshua would have been temporarily bolstered by the addition of one more sword to his army

But instead, he is made more permanently strong and courageous by submitting HIS own sword to the agenda and work of the Lord.

You want to be strong and courageous? Do we, as a church, want to be truly strong and courageous? It doesn't start with being assertive

It starts with submission. With worship. With giving ourselves over to a greater king, a greater agenda, a greater power

And from that strong and mighty place, we can be strong and courageous

Some closing take-home questions for you this morning:

1. What other kingdoms are vying for the allegiance of your heart?

Our hearts are going to drift towards any number of other kingdoms: if it's not political, it'll be our country, or our race, or our family, or the people who share a vocation or hobby or interest that we also share in

There are any number of allegiances that are going to vie for the commitment of your heart, it's helpful for us to name what those are

2. What do you think it looks like to live out God's "NEITHER?" To both participate and be prophetic in those kingdoms from a primary commitment to the Kingdom of God?

To follow Jesus and do life as he did it means that we're going to both be participants in this world as well as prophetic in it, to speak the truth about it.

This takes some prayerful intentionality. This takes some thoughtfulness. This might take some study of the Scriptures.

I want to invite you to take a look at the Scriptures, to take a look at how Jesus navigated this tension and to join him in the good and important work of relating to the kingdoms of this world rooted first and foremost in the kingdom of God.

Because the reality is this: this world and the kingdoms of it are passing. There is NO eternally secure place here on this earth from which you can be strong and courageous

The ONLY way that we can truly be strong and courageous no matter what happens, is to commit ourselves to the one king and the one kingdom that is not passing, not fading, and will never, ever go away

THAT's the one true place where you and I can be strong and courageous.

And this morning we have a chance to embrace that transfer of allegiance from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of the one Eternal King as we take communion

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he sealed his kingdom with his own body and his own blood—his own death.

And he gave us a meal as a means to remember his death and to draw us further up and further into HIS kingdom and to help us to release the lesser kingdoms that we tend to attach ourselves to

He said to his first followers: this bread is my body, broken for you, eat this remembrance of me

Then he took the cup and said “this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins, drink this in remembrance of me.”

Here this morning, we worship this king, the one who was slain for us and for our salvation to make a way for us to be able to transfer our allegiances from the shaky kingdoms of this world to the immovable, permanent kingdom of God

This table is the table of Jesus—if you belong to Jesus, this table belongs to you. If you're not yet a Jesus-follower, we invite you to consider the gift on offer to you in Christ Jesus's death and resurrection

And the invitation to transfer your allegiance from the kingdoms of this world to the eternal kingdom of God.

Going to move to a time of worship, the elements are at tables, whenever you're ready, invite you to move towards the tables and eat and drink as a signal of your willingness to leave behind lesser kingdoms and give yourself to the eternal, permanent kingdom of the living God.

PRAY

BENEDICTION:

Prayer Room

Newbies

Chairs