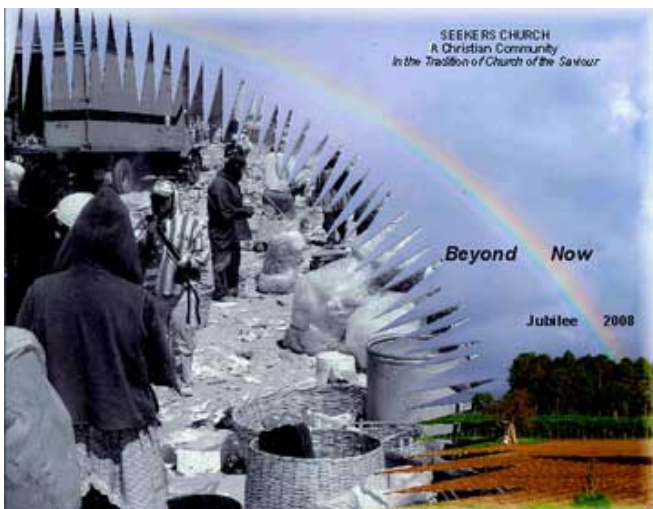


# "From Shechem to Samaria to Prince William County" by Pat Conover

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November 9, 2008



Joshua 24: 14-28

I began crossing the Potomac River in June to volunteer in the campaign of Judy Feder for Congress and to support the campaign of Barack Obama. I was assigned to develop the work in 19 precincts in Prince William County, Virginia, including the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park, about 35,000 voters. I got off to a good start and then the wheels came off my lofty plans when I got a third stent in my heart as a birthday present. I followed through as best I could and other Seekers did some volunteer work there as well.

Judy Feder lost and she got a much lower percentage of the vote than I anticipated. Though Obama did very well in Prince William County, Judy did not. Winning and losing is part of political activity and I have experienced both over many campaigns. Over time I have come to appreciate electoral politics more and more. Despite many flaws in campaigns and elections, I have come to value the core ritual of democracy despite all the clumsiness, the occasional fraud and rule manipulations, and despite the low quality, even hatefulness, of some political comments and advertisements. Thankfully, in this election, there were signs that negative campaigning created some pushback.

I believe democracy is a gift of God and I believe this form of government is, in part, a gift of God to be treasured and engaged. I know many of you are turned-off by the bad behavior in many campaigns but I am hoping to draw attention here to a spiritual vision that will encourage you to hang in with democracy and to do your part to make it work better.

I see democracy as arising from two traditions: Greece and Rome on the one hand and Judeo-Christian on the other. I'm not going to discuss how they came together in this sermon and will limit myself to the story developed over the course of biblical history.

The foundation story for the people of Israel was the escape from slavery in Egypt with Moses as the leader. The exodus occurred in the Middle-Bronze age about 1300 years before Jesus, about 300 years, give or take a few decades, before the triumph and kingship of David, and 600 or 700 years before

the earliest biblical text were written by the Deuteronomistic Priests after the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon.

The book of Joshua tells an idealized story of the end of the exodus, the triumph over Jericho and then the land of Canaan, and the genocide of the previous tribes in Canaan. The victories were not as neat or complete as the stories in Joshua nor were the genocides as thorough. The distorting lens is the priestly eye of the Deuteronomistic Priests who were intent on re-establishing the purity of the Hebrew people gathered around the law of Moses.

Our lectionary passage includes the creation of the first political covenant in the history of Israel. You can easily see the interest in purity in the challenge to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the "I Am" God of Moses; rather than the gods of Abraham's ancestors or the gods of the local populace. (That concern shows that the genocide of the tribes of Canaan was far from complete.) Well, we don't know anything about the content of the covenant from this passage but a few important things are quite visible from the context.

The first critical point is that the covenant was framed as a covenant with God not just an agreement on governing principles. The second is that the covenant was not declared by Joshua, in the way that Moses declared the Ten Commandments, but was discussed and then ratified by the people. The third comes from the preceding chapters in which a long list of the participating tribes and leaders is recorded with some description of who gets what land areas.

The fourth point is that the story places the adoption of the covenant in Shechem. Shechem was an important city of that time. Earlier it had been the capital of a coalition of Canaan tribes that resisted the rule of Egypt for awhile and was then crushed. Shechem was not in the wilderness. It was a natural capital city for the hill country of Canaan before David captured Jerusalem and finally consolidated control of Canaan a couple of centuries later. And finally, this coalition of tribes that accepted the covenant was coordinated after Shechem not by a king but by a tradition of judges who solved problems by negotiations with reference to the laws of Moses.

In other words, the Shechem covenant, whatever its words, is the first moment in which the Hebrew people began to intentionally govern themselves. The Deuteronomic Priests who wrote this story liked the time of the judges. That is not surprising since the judges were the forerunners of the priests who contended with David and sought to balance the power of kingship with the power of the temple. Their histories emphasize all the ways that the kings fell short of doing the will of God and blame the people for demanding a king rather than the continued rule of judges. Samuel, not David, is the real hero of the Deuteronomic History stories.

Another way of pointing out the importance of this historic moment is to say that it was the beginning of the rule of law, not the mere arbitrary dictates of kings. Alternatively stated, though military coalition was a huge part of the story, the numerous tribes came together around religious ritual and a principle of justice and a shared story rather than as a "super-tribe" with a king.

Fast forward with me. Israel has a lot more to learn about governance and the will of God as the centuries unfold through the brief empire of David and Solomon, the split of the kingdom between North and South, the fall of the North and finally the fall of the South, the home of the Deuteronomic Priests. Then came centuries of captivity, return, rebuilding, new captivities, the rise of Alexander the Great and then of Rome, the rebellion of the Maccabees, the crushing of the Roman Senate and the rise of Augustus Caesar.

A thousand years after David along comes Jesus. The genealogies that purport to link Jesus to David testify that the gospel writers, at least in part, link Jesus to the hope for a new government. Three hundred years after Jesus, the Christian Church became a leading presence in the declining Roman Empire. They pick up the link of Jesus to David and sound a triumphant theme of Jesus as king that is far from the gospel story. I can't help inserting that I deeply dislike Handel's Messiah because of such triumphalism.

It is easy to think of Jesus in terms of the prophetic tradition of Hebrew scripture, a prophetic tradition built out of the priestly critique of the divine right of kings, a critique that makes kingship subject to the critique of justice.

An often overlooked theme, or speculation, concerns the relationship of Jesus to the Zealots, the inheritors of the rebellious (terrorist) spirit of the Maccabees. There were zealots in the list of the disciples of Jesus and at least one story has Peter carrying a sword and trying to fight for Jesus when the priest's posse comes out to capture him. Whatever themes and dreams the Zealots were carrying were crushed in

the genocide of Jerusalem three decades after the death of Jesus.

Instead, for this sermon, I want to turn to the most knowable thing about the teaching and ministry of Jesus, his relationship with John the Baptist. John was beheaded by Herod Antipas for his political criticism, sort of like the criticism of the sexual improprieties of Bill Clinton.

Jesus preached the same message as John, "Repent for the Empire of God is among you." The switch to the word "empire" not only reflects a better translation of the Greek words, in redirects attention from the tradition of the kingship of David to seeing what was going on as an alternative to the empire of Rome.

I do not mean that Jesus was preaching a theme of direct political challenge. Rather, I think Jesus was preaching the good news that some Jews had learned during the long centuries of being under the oppression of foreign powers. To understand the political implications of the core teaching of Jesus we need to reconsider the political circumstances that Jesus lived within. The empire of Rome was like a previous Persian empire in that it allowed a certain amount of self-governing autonomy in exchange for taxation and military cooperation.

The Israel of the time of Jesus was during the rule of Tiberius Caesar, the Caesar who followed Augustus. The rule of Rome was comparatively light-handed and a lot of the day-to-day governance of Israel was through the puppet Herods and

the judicial courts of the third temple. That temple complex in Jerusalem included what was then the largest building in the world. It is hardly surprising that a lot of Jews were not that unhappy with the political arrangement of their day. Taxes were heavy but a lot of people were making a living and the taxes that were paid supported tens of thousands of workers on the several ongoing construction projects in Jerusalem. There was room for a certain amount of national pride and the pride of being able to conduct dramatic religious ceremonies every year at the temple.

Against such a back drop, the movement that followed John the Baptist, and then Jesus, up in Galilee and out into the wilderness areas to the East, could be seen as sort of a tempest in a teapot. But the message and the practice of John and Jesus was fundamentally radical in both political and spiritual terms. As Mark makes abundantly clear, the message was about forgiveness. How could forgiveness be so radical?

First of all, if you accepted baptism and believe you were permanently forgiven by God, you were free of the animal sacrifice of temple worship, free of any legalistic interpretation of the Jewish law and the purity themes of the Pharisees, free of the requirements of keeping kosher and all the numerous cultural laws, including circumcision, advanced by the Deuteronomic Priests in the interest of Jewish purity.

In the joys and relief of receiving and giving forgiveness you come into a community of loving and caring for one another that can flourish in the midst of political oppression. In such a community there is an intrinsic equality and an appreciation of the gifts that different people bring. It is

not a Roman understanding of citizenship but a realization that we all need to look for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and engage in common discernment of where we are being led. In political terms we are guided towards governance for the common good, trying to balance justice and mercy, building a respect for the rights of individuals, and encouraging an attitude of caring that warms the heart of citizen responsibility and authority. This helps us understand that democracy is not an end in itself but a path toward living together well in the midst of significant differences of opinion about the ends and means of governance.

In short, the Judeo-Christian tradition provides some guidance as to what it means to be a good citizen and not just a self-interested citizen.

To see the political implications of the teaching of Jesus and John, we can consider the attitude of Jesus towards Samaritans. The Samaritans are a distinct Jewish body that has existed continuously from at least post-exilic times in Shechem and on Mount Gerizim. They built and then rebuilt a temple on Mount Gerizim and claim that temple as the center of their practice of Judaism rather than the temple in Jerusalem. They honor the Pentateuch but not the other parts of Jewish scripture. In short, they can be thought of as the faithful inheritors of the Northern tribes of the Kingdom of David.

Not surprisingly, the priests in Jerusalem did not like the Samaritans. Most Galileans, including Jesus, looked to the temple in Jerusalem as their center point. Based on the book of Luke, Jesus liked the Samaritans. We have the story of the Samaritan who helped a wounded Jew (Luke 10: 33-36) and the



story of a Samaritan leper who was the only leper to thank Jesus for being healed (Luke 17: 15-18). Luke also places Jesus in Samaria as part of his missionary travels.

Luke allows us to see Jesus as sympathetic to a kind of first century Judaism that honored Torah teaching but held little regard for Temple Judaism. I'm not suggesting that Jesus was a crypto-Samaritan. His gospel message was a message of spiritual freedom and transformation for the Samaritans who also focused on animal sacrifice as a propitiation of God's anger. Nonetheless, for this sermon, I sense an affinity of the theme of "Repent, the Empire of God is among you," and the original covenant of Shechem that was based in gathering a group of people who would try to live together according to the guidance of God as found in the Mosaic law, and the story of God's love for the people who would be faithful followers.

The story of Christianity and democracy took an important turn when the great expansion to the Gentiles demoted the importance of a direct line of Jewish inheritance. This transition points to the universalization of the Judeo-Christian story and led, over a couple of centuries, to the writing of Christian theology based on Jewish story joined to insights in the languages and assumptions of Aristotle and Plato. (You can see how this sermon builds on the sermon of John Morris last Sunday.)

Another sermon could tease out the contributions of Renaissance and Reformation to the formation of democracy in the United States. But I am going to jump back to Prince William County last Tuesday. Obama won in Prince William County with an improvement of about 15 percent over the vote for John Kerrey. This does not represent so much a change of

mind as a change of population due to in-migration. Trish and I canvassed in a precinct that had a majority of several kinds of Asians, significant Hispanic and African-American groups, some Africans, and about 10 percent whites.

Whatever the population dynamics, whatever the message and organization of the campaigns, Prince William County shared in a nation-wide change that gave a 6 percent win to Obama. Once again we have the near-miracle of regime change without civil war. How much is that worth to you?

I beg you not to take democracy for granted. With all its warts we had a nationwide conversation and the people chose. Yes I am aware that people make their voting choices based on broadly diverse factors that include many aspects beside public policy positions. The warts reveal unhappy partial truths about our society and culture. We talked to a high school senior who appeared to welcome the thought of the assassination of Obama and learned of an 82 year old woman who was afraid Obama would turn white people into slaves. Such stories reveal the brokenness and short-comings of some of our neighbors and fellow-citizens. They call us out to the everyday work of healing, education, and transformation, to sharing the gospel, to sharing our thankfulness for the United States.

I am ecstatic that Obama won. I think it will matter a lot for the future of the United States and the world. But if McCain had won, I would do what I did for the 18 years I worked on the Hill for the United Church of Christ. I would try to strengthen the small voice of people who care passionately about ending poverty and advancing human and civil rights. I would continue to work for peace. You have

to love democracy when you lose as well as when you win. Despite my current euphoria, I expect that it will not be long before I start caring about issues such as health care and begin to point out the problems in the solutions that Obama has touted.

I take citizenship seriously. So many have dreamed and died and lived to bring us to this point. I have run my race as an advocate for justice and peace and am delighted that others will have a good chance to build on whatever little bit of contribution I was able to make. I will continue to do my diminishing part.

This was an historic election for many reasons. Let us thank God that we lived to see this day. Let us remember and reach out in fellowship to those who feel they have lost so much in this election, to those who are afraid because of the lies that have been told, in some cases afraid because of bad consciences, and to those who are afraid because they see the weaknesses in Obama. Let us not make enemies of our political opponents. Instead, let us pray for those who most bitterly feel defeat after this election, and do the bits we can do to reduce alienation. Let us look for the best perspectives in those with whom we disagree, and breed forgiveness rather than revenge at every point where that is possible.

Thanks to Joshua and thanks to Jesus.