

True grit: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

## **I've never been totally honest about baptismal vows. I bet Joshua would have been.**

by [Talitha Arnold](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

He had real grit, that Joshua. When his fellow spies felt like grasshoppers and the Canaanites looked like giants, Joshua and his friend Caleb urged the Hebrews to take them on even though their compatriots threatened to stone them for their advice. After Moses died and Joshua assumed command, he showed his mettle by trusting God to bring down the walls of Jericho with only the sound of the trumpet and the shouts of the people.

But I think Joshua's greatest moment came in his farewell speech to the Israelites, when he told them the truth about their covenant with God. He and his family had chosen to follow the Lord, Joshua proclaimed. The people roared enthusiastically. They would do the same. But Joshua didn't accept their initial response. Instead he reminded them not once but three times of the cost of that covenant and the consequences of breaking it. If they dealt falsely with their God, Joshua warned, God would do them harm and consume them. Probably the Hebrews were ready to stone him for being so demandingly honest.

As a parish minister, I assume Joshua's role when I invite people to affirm their covenant with God and one another. But I seldom have his courage in the follow-through. If I did, when parents brought their child for baptism, I would ask more than the generic "Do you promise to grow with this child in the Christian faith and offer him or her the nurture of the Christian church?"

Instead I'd ask, in front of God and the whole congregation, "Do you promise to get him or her out of bed, dressed and here every Sunday morning for the next 18 years, even when you've had a long week or you'd rather sleep in or there's a soccer match or when this darling infant has grown into a surly, tattooed teenager who thinks church is 'dumb'?"

I've never been that honest about baptismal vows. I bet Joshua would have been. When people join the church, Joshua would have asked more than a rote "Do you renounce the powers of evil and seek the freedom of new life in Christ?" After the unsuspecting new member said yes, Joshua would have followed with, "So when you buy your next car, will you resist all the commercial hype that encourages you to overspend on something that eats up resources and pollutes the air?"

Had Joshua presided at my ordination, I doubt he would have let me get by with a simple vow to study, pray, teach and preach. He probably would have demanded, "Will you give up your personal gods of procrastination, perfectionism and the pursuit of trivia?"

As a pastor, of course I'd like to beef up the traditional vows of baptism or membership. But then I'd need more assurance in dealing with Joshua's dire consequences of covenant-breaking. For many people in my congregation, the primary experience of covenants—marriage, family, church affiliation or job—has been their endings. How do I capture Joshua's passion for keeping covenant with God without sounding judgmental and damning of persons whose human covenants have been broken, either by design or default?

Joshua's uncompromising stance on the exclusivity of the covenant poses another challenge. Even as a child growing up Congregational in the Southwest, I knew the history of violence and devastation that faithful Protestants inflicted on Native Americans and Catholics when they encountered those people's "foreign gods."

Yet when I moved back west after a ten-year sojourn among Connecticut Yankees, the spiritual smorgasbord of Santa Fe felt overwhelming. Like other New Age centers, it seemed filled with Anglo spiritual dilettantes, people who had grown up Protestant or Catholic and then tried every spiritual path from Buddhism and Native American practices to Sufi dancing and Hindu chant. When they landed at the United Church of Santa Fe, they often felt lost and disoriented, as if they had gone through multiple intimate relationships. At the same time, they were wary and uncertain about committing to any faith tradition.

I resonate with Joshua's willingness to affirm what he believed, but I want to do it without damning other faiths. How do I retain the essence of his covenant without its exclusivity?

A chance encounter with Martin Marty taught me how. In 1989 Marty was speaking on religious pluralism at the University of New Mexico. I almost didn't go—I'd had my fill of spiritual "options." But I'd enjoyed his columns in the Century for years, so I made the two-hour trip. What Marty said that night has been a plumb line for my ministry. When I asked, "What advice do you have for a United Church of Christ pastor serving a church that isn't sure it wants to be a Christian church in the New Age capital of Santa Fe?" He paused. "The United Church of Christ?" he asked. I nodded. "You have the blood of the Puritans in you! Claim your inheritance." But then he said, "If you go deep enough into any faith tradition, you find the common ground with all other traditions. That's why a Baptist preacher like Martin Luther King could learn from Gandhi the Hindu, or why a Capuchin like Thomas Merton was in conversation with Buddhist monks."

"I think that's what all of us are seeking," he continued. "We want that common ground. But we have to go deep into our own tradition to find it. You need to tell your people that."

It's been almost 15 years since that night, but there's seldom a day I don't remember Marty's words. "Go deep," he said. It sounds like Joshua's "Choose this day whom you will serve." Either way, it takes grit. Either way it leads to life and to God.