People of God:

Our text from Joshua 2:11, 24, says, “…our hearts melted…for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below….All the people are melting in fear…”

There is a lot of fear in our world these days, but not typically a fear of God. There also seems to be quite a bit of anxiety and fear being expressed in some Christian circles. Some of it comes as a result of the US Supreme Court ruling about gay marriage. The response of some Christians ranges from fear for the freedom of the church to fear about the future of any societal limits on marriage.

There is fear from the burning of black churches in the Southern US; a fear of ongoing racism and attacks on the church.

There is fear about youth and young adults leaving the church, and the demise of the church.

Beyond the church, there is fear about heat waves and changing climate. There is fear generated by reports of bomb threat hoaxes against the Westjet airline.

These and other various fears seem to be fueled by headlines and media reports, as well as a social media fascination with extreme events and extreme responses.

It seems that a common reaction has become to identify a possible worst case scenario as the probable future. The worst case scenario raises all kinds of fears. “Really?! Could that happen?! Oh no!! What shall we do?!"

As we read stories from the book of Joshua, it is good to remind ourselves that this is more than simply a history book about localized events that happened a few thousand years ago in the Middle East. The story of Joshua helps us to understand world history as it tells us a story of God’s work in the world. It can also help us to put current events and current fears into a bigger picture.

The story of Joshua is part of the story about God’s mission to restore his relationship with all people. That relationship was broken at the beginning of time. The struggle recorded in Joshua is not a struggle between two ethnic communities or two nations, but rather a struggle between two radically incompatible ways of life, two cultures, two kingdoms. The one kingdom follows the fall of the first Adam in denying the Lord of heaven as the one true God. This kingdom worships the Baals and other false gods of their own making.

The other kingdom is emerging in the fullness of Jesus, the second Adam. It is the kingdom defined by worship of the one true God and by obedience to his will. The question to be answered in the book of Joshua is, “Which of these two kingdoms will inherit the earth?”

This conflict that has been going on throughout history still goes on today, reflected in
some of the headlines that evoke fear. There is really nothing new under the sun. The first chapter of the book of Joshua gives a reminder of the courage and strength with which to read the headlines: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:6-9).

That confidence is also found in the promise of Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

As Joshua led the Old Testament people of Israel, so Jesus leads the New Testament Israel, the church, into God’s saving purpose. God calls people to himself, to follow him and to know his blessing. The story in Joshua 2 includes the reassurance of the promised victory. The end of the story is hinted at already in the beginning.

The story is presented in a concentric structure. This is like a target, with wide outer circles and the focus in the centre. It begins with the spies being sent out with the instructions, “Go, look over the land.” The story ends with the spies reporting back to Joshua “the LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands.” What happens in between is centred around Rahab’s speech. There the spies receive the information they wanted.

Look at the structure of this chapter.

A v. 1 -- the spies are sent out
B vv. 2-3 -- Rahab is addressed by the king of Jericho who represents the powers of Canaan. She is warned to betray the spies or else.
C vv.4-7 -- Rahab’s response is to conceal the spies
D vv. 8-11 -- Rahab goes to the spies and reports on how the fear of the LORD has disabled the Canaanites. The response of the Canaanites is that they hear, they fear.
D¹ vv. 12-14 -- Rahab pleads for her life. The response of Rahab is she hears, she believes
C¹ vv. 15-16 -- Rahab helps the spies to escape
B¹ vv. 17-21 -- Rahab is addressed by the spies who represent the power of the LORD and Israel. She is warned not to betray them or else.
A¹ vv. 22-24 -- the spies return

The speech of Rahab in vv. 8-11 forms this same kind of structure.

A I know the Lord your God is giving you this land
B The Canaanites are too scared to resist
C We have heard of what your God has done
B¹ The Canaanites are scared
A¹ I know the Lord is God of heaven and earth.

Central to this chapter is the central point of Rahab’s speech. The reputation of the Lord has preceded him. The people have heard of what God has done and they know they don’t
have a chance to oppose him. The response to this reputation of God comes in two forms. There are those who cower in fear of what God will do next, knowing they are helpless to oppose him, yet they resist anyway. And there are those who will surrender in faith to honour this God with their lives and believe in him and serve him.

Joshua is assured of victory in the mission which the Lord has given to him. It is not because of anything which Joshua has done. It is what the Lord has already done for his people. His power over those who oppose him was displayed in the plagues in Egypt. His power over nature was displayed in the parting of the Red Sea. His power to do what he wants to do was displayed in preserving his people in the desert with daily manna. All this and more has been reported to the people and kings in Canaan. They are now in awe of this powerful God who fights for his people. They know that God will win in the end.

Rahab is a central character in this story. She is the only person whose name is given. The focus on Rahab is not that she is a woman or a prostitute. She is Rahab, the citizen of Canaan. She speaks on behalf of the people of the land. Therefore she represents the fear of the people in her words. She also represents the option of surrender to the LORD. She chooses to turn her back on everything Canaanite: her gods, her way of life, her civilization. She acts in a new loyalty to the LORD. She recognizes that the future belongs to the LORD and to Israel. Because of that she lays her life on the line with her surrender to Israel’s God. Her action is not simply to save her life when the enemy comes charging in. She changes sides and gives her life to the Lord.

This is the key to the whole story of the spies being sent out. They were told to check out the land, especially Jericho. They were to find the strengths and weaknesses of the land and of the city. Underlying their instructions is the question, “Can we succeed?”

Rahab provides the answer in her statement that the LORD has already defeated the Canaanites because of the fear that is in their hearts. As if to prove that, Rahab surrenders without a fight because she has heard what the LORD has done.

Remember, God’s purpose is to restore relationships. This is not just for Israel, but for all nations. In Joshua 2, as the conquest of Canaan begins, one family turns to the Lord. We could look ahead to Acts 2, the story of the early church going out into the world, where the “conquest” begins with 3000 people from all nations turning to the Lord. In that sense, Acts 2 is a parallel to Joshua 2, with the Lord continuing to bring his reconciliation to all people.

The battle to establish God’s kingdom in this world continues. No longer is it fought with swords and spears. We no longer seek to win a physical battle over the lives of others. We fight a spiritual battle, to win the hearts of people for the Lord. The Lord’s reputation goes before him.
Look at the great things which our Lord has done. He died on the cross for our sins. He rose again from the dead to defeat the power of sin and the grave. Nothing can stop our God.

How is this message being shared today? What is the message that the church is giving? Are people hearing about and seeing the great things that God has done? Or do they hear judgment and fear?

In the aftermath of the murder of blacks at the church in Charleston, South Carolina, there was an opportunity to show restored relationships between races, to speak of hope and forgiveness and healing. It was an opportunity to show the difference that faith in Christ can make.

Reporters usually ask the same question: How do Christians respond to tragedy? Are they serious about forgiveness and hope? God gets the glory when that message is clearly expressed.

I came across a recent article in the National Post. Two people were stabbed to death in a work camp outside of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Abe Klassen, a childhood friend of one of the victims is quoted in the National Post,

"He was a good friend and a hard worker. While he had made some not so wise choices in the past,” Klassen said, “he had recently become deeply religious and was making changes in his life. He was a different man. He just wanted to live for the Lord.” Klassen said the man’s family is still in shock over the death, but is working to try to forgive the person responsible for the killing. Another testimony of God at work in people’s lives as they respond to tragedy.

Consider the testimony of Church representatives as they spoke of confession of wrong and hope of reconciliation as part of the final events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

We know the story of what God has been doing, especially in Jesus Christ. We know God’s desire. We know he is victorious over sin and death.

This is our hope in a broken world. We do not have to live in fear and anxiety. We can know and believe that the Lord is in control. That doesn’t mean life will be easy or that answers will be obvious. It does mean that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

Let us live that hope in such a way that our neighbours and friends will find hope and peace in the Lord. Let us live the good news, that others may hear the stories of what God has done and is doing and may know the Lord, the loving God, who is over all things.

Amen.